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Come in...and be captivated...

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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 your 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 things that inspire you, use the tools



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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.

Books We're Excited About!

Three Times the Charm!

By Assistant Editor, Denise Bouchard

Here are three new books on writing that we love. The first came to me the way most good things do here at *The Write Place At the Write Time* – serendipitously. It was after Christmas, the holiday greetings were sent and received but there were happily still some things coming in the mail. One day, the UPS man delivered something I wasn't even aware of. This unexpected surprise came from The Berkley Publishing Group and inside was a book called, *Blueprint Your Best Seller: Organize and Revise Any Manuscript with the Book Architecture Method* by Stuart Horwitz in which he guides you through steps and exercises to get your manuscript from first draft to successfully finished draft.

His method focuses on three concepts of scene, series and theme and helps writers evaluate their writing at the structural level. I had heard of this concept before from a professor at Brown University but his style seemed a bit mechanical while Horwitz's process is an efficient and even enjoyable one which can take you to publishing success. So get out that manuscript and cut it up with scissors – don't worry though, it's just a lesson in the Rearranging Your Scenes method. Enjoy!

Another find was *642 Things To Write About* which is self-explanatory but the prompts are fun and atypical. This is from the San Francisco Writers' Grotto with an introduction by Po Bronson with such gems as:

- 1) Write from the point of view of a literary character who changed your life;
- 2) Write for 10 minutes about what is running through a husband-to-be's head while his wife-to-be is walking down the aisle to the altar where he stands;
- 3) You're the White House chef preparing a steak dinner for the President of India. What do you serve and how does it turn out?

When I think of a grotto, I'm entranced. There is a private waterfall or pond and a natural light source at night like stalactites in a cave. It's a place where alchemy happens. This "grotto" is comprised of 35 writers in a building in San Francisco in a maze of small offices. The book was written in a single day with no advance notice. An editor put in a call to them and just said, "Let's do a book of 642 things to write about." Within one hour, they had 100 ideas and in one day they created something huge that wasn't there before. I can tell you that I just picked the above three examples randomly and as a writer, my brain was in first gear. When I thought of a grotto as a magical place where alchemy happens I was right.

Recently, I wrote a short non-fiction story for our magazine. When I came to the denouement though, I really had to go within and try to remember where I was after a breakup in college, before what soon led to the beginnings of the life that I have now. It seemed terribly difficult – to write one short paragraph to describe that in-between time of loss and the ensuing four years of finding a love that is timeless and thus I was stuck.

I turned to my new book on the shelf, *Tarot For Writers* by Corrine Kenner. I had spotted this in the bookstore and was curious. It seemed very unusual to use the tarot as a prompt but I like the unusual and I love using the “tool” of intuition. Utilizing the tarot in this way is a method that's been used by John Steinbeck and Stephen King. Naturally, the notion was intriguing. The book had gotten good as well as luke-warm reviews such as “the prompts for the cards chosen are too literal.” I randomly opened the book and the card that came up was the Death card which actually made sense because I was writing of endings. This card may appear ominous at first and the prompts do talk of literal meanings but Kenner also speaks of the metaphysical meanings of transformation and rebirth and relationships that have served their purpose. I needed something gentler though to help me through this process of evolution so I turned to the *Inner Child* cards by Lerner & Lerner from Bear and Co. and there lay the exact answer of how to symbolize that time in my life.

In this deck, the Death card is Sleeping Beauty and she is simply in transition. I then remembered back to how over the next few years after the breakup I would literally and figuratively empty my hope chest of its contents and fill it with the kinds of things I really wanted, including the hope of certain qualities in a husband-to-be. It was the end of one cycle and the advent of another; thus, the card that came up couldn't have been more perfect to concisely finish my story.

I highly recommend *Tarot For Writers*, but choose a gentle deck to pair it with that speaks to you. Having worked with children, I love pairing it with the gentleness of the *Inner Child* cards. Don't forget to be still and deeply access your own intuition.

Essays

Author, editor, ghostwriter, writing coach, and spiritual counselor, Noelle Sterne has published over 250 published fiction and nonfiction pieces in print and online venues. She contributes to many guest blogs and writes a monthly column in Coffeehouse for Writers, “Bloom Where You're Writing.” With a Ph.D. from Columbia University, for over 28 years Noelle has guided doctoral candidates to completion of their dissertations. Based on this work, her latest project-in-progress is a practical-psychological-

spiritual handbook, [Grad U: Complete Your Dissertation—Finally—and Ease the Trip for Yourself and Everyone Who Has to Live With You](#). In her current book, [Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams](#) (Unity Books), Noelle draws examples from her practice and other aspects of life to help writers and others release regrets, relabel their past, and reach their lifelong yearnings. Visit Noelle at www.trustyourlifenow.com

Swimming in Jello

By Noelle Sterne

All good writing is swimming under water and holding your breath.

--F. Scott Fitzgerald[1]

Starting a new piece of writing can be like first love—we're excited, exhilarated, ecstatic. We yearn to be alone with our work, squeeze in time for it at every possible moment, and can't wait to return. We bounce up early, stay awake late, and bolt upright in the middle of the night to rush to our desks.

But then, as after six months of marriage, our elation yields to the hard realization that a prodigious amount of work must be done, most of it uphill. We're still writing, but now it feels more like *writhing*. Our metaphors are those of struggle: we're hacking through a thick forest with no light, tramping over an endless desert, or, as a suddenly stagnant novelist friend put it, "swimming in orange jello."

At these times, no seasoned woodsman appears from behind a tree, no native guide shows up on the horizon, and no one throws us a life jacket. We're sorely tempted to collapse against a trunk, drop into the sand, or sink down to the bottom of the pool and let the jello engulf us.

When my novelist friend found himself swimming in jello, he grabbed for what he thought was a lifeline: an outline. He struggled with this, though, and after our talk I was prompted to more thought about how we write.

Some writers swear by outlines; others can't abide them. Many articles and blogs extol or vilify them, with persuasive quotations and tips from successful authors on either side. If you're stuck trying to punch through

the jello, the following may help you explore the battleground to reach your own middle ground.

Are Outlines Life Jackets?

Outlines are time-honored devices of some of our best writers. For one of his novels, William Faulkner scribbled outlines on the walls of his study, preserved in his house in Oxford, Mississippi. Some writers make chapter outlines and fill them in with meticulous notes. Novelist and writing mentor Nancy Kress tells of the science fiction author Orson Scott Card who “thought in minute detail for two years about his novel,” writing all the details down, and then “wrote it, nonstop, in two weeks.”[2] Extreme, yes; great outline use, yes again. Other writers use blackboards, whiteboards, and bulletin boards to “think out” their books, adding, deleting, and re-pinning notes as the ideas mature.

If you set out to write a romance, mystery, or suspense novel, an outline may work well because these genres follow a fairly set formula. Clues and crises must appear at certain points; plots must turn sharply at measurable intervals to hold reader interest. An outline will help you keep track of the events and avoid repetition and redundancy of scenes, events, and characters’ actions.

If your book has spun out in your mind like a rapid-speed movie, you are indeed blessed. While the structure shimmers, catch it with an outline. You can also catch it with a screenwriters’ outline, called a storyboard. Conceptualized in scenes, like comic-book frames, these can be effective tools for writers who think visually.

Your outline doesn’t have to be formal, like the ones our high school teachers tried in vain to instill in us, with all those indented descending letters and numbers. Yours must only be organized enough so you can understand it a week from now. Do it by chapter, chronology, or sequence of events, whatever makes most sense.

An outline’s biggest virtue may be that it gives you a sense of security. When the screen or paper threatens to blind you with its blankness, you can ward off the evil glare with your outline. And even though the outline may be linear, you don’t have to be. If you’re stumped, you can survey it and jump in any place that sparks you to start.

Author Tim O'Mara did just this. Snagged at a halfway point in his novel, he had certain later scenes "mapped out" in his head but didn't know how he'd get to them. He says, "I allowed myself to do something I'd never attempted before . . . *I wrote out of sequence.*" Once they were written, "the rest of the story took on a real shape."

O'Mara also uses another refreshingly low-tech method: index cards. Instead of pages, sheets, or docs for chapters, sections, or scenes he writes scenes on index card. Then he lays them out in a preliminary order and inserts blank cards of another color where he feels additional scenes are needed. He can move the cards around as logic and sequence dictate and write the "unwritten" scenes as they fall into place. This is how he completed his second novel. And toyed with the idea, for his next, of a full-fledged outline.[3]

O'Mara's note cards allow flexibility of scene arrangement, addition, elimination, and even combination. Even if you do a traditional outline, you can still change it at any point. I rarely do an outline but sometimes, especially when an idea first springs up, I jot some notes. They may be phrases that resound or points to make, and sometimes the notes are in sequence, sometimes not.

Occasionally, I've found, as if from around a sneaky corner, a more complete outline emerges. I sit very quiet, writing softly, not wanting to scare it away. And the way opens, like the field at the end of the forest, the fringe of the city across the desert, the life raft in the jello pool. The first draft, I must admit, does go faster and smoother. Yes, outlines can help.[4]

Are Outlines Straitjackets?

But if you're uncomfortable with outlines, or even notes, by all means stay away from them. Unlike high school English, rules needn't bind your writing. My novelist friend started an outline to stave off his feelings of frustration and anxiety as he tried to navigate in his jello pool. But he stopped outlining quickly because, as he said, "You gotta know what you're doing beforehand."

Other writers have similar experiences. Writing teacher and novelist Leonard Bishop counsels, "The ideal time for developing an outline for your novel is *after* your novel is finished. . . . For every professional writer who treats an outline as seriously as the novel itself, there is a professional

writer who believes an outline is a waste of time.”[5]

Like Canadian author Margaret Atwood. She was asked in an interview if she uses outlines. “I did that once,” she replied. “It was a terrible mistake.”[6]

The best reason not to outline, though, is because you may depend on it too much. You’ve created it, but it becomes somehow inviolate, as if your English teacher is breathing down your desk.

The outline can stop you from listening to your inner promptings and opening to the well of creativity inside you. It can inhibit and minimize your faith in your writerly intuition, where to cut, where to add, where to diverge entirely. Bishop explains:

Outlines contain only what the writer consciously knows. They do not contain content the writer must still discover. . . . The act of writing is an intuitional connection to content, which is alive in the subterranean strata of the writer’s depths. It has no order. It must be discovered and given order as it applies to the total novel [or other work].[7]

In the Jello Pool

What we must discover is what happens when we’re in the pool grappling with the jello. For me generally, outlines force me into a too-small coat and keep me from flinging my arms wide in creative fields.

The writing itself, in Bishop’s terms, shows you what to explore, how to proceed. Many others have observed this mysterious phenomenon. Joan Didion says, “I don’t know what I think until I write it down.”[8]

Through the process you discover what is in you, what should be set down, and what should be winnowed. In the process, your questions are answered, your doubts assuaged. You come to discover what you really want to say in writing.

But you can’t discover anything if you can’t endure the pool of limbo. It takes courage, tenacity, and ability to withstand the wobbles of indecision. To return the next day when answers keep sliding away, or worse, when all you feel is blank, and to stick it out.

The state of not knowing can be uncomfortable, too itchy, for many of us. But when we tolerate this feeling and keep going despite its discomfort, we'll not only get to the other side of the pool but we'll produce work that's richer and truer than any stony outlines could have forecasted.

Monster in the Pool

In this pool of limbo, though, another monster can menace: the voice dismissing what you've done. You can't shake that hollow-stomach heaviness that it's all repetitive, redundant, ridiculous, silly, stupid, meaningless, worthless, and on and on.

If you've ever talked to another writer, you know that, in the throes of the work, we all hear these wind-out-of-your-sail messages. Margaret Atwood calls them "this is drivel' moments." [9] Realize that these foul messages are only your persnickety inner censor erupting. Kick yours out of the jello pool and keep going.

Later, you may well find some of those censorious judgments accurate. But right now, you're the last person to appraise what you've done or where you're going with it. You're simply too close, not only in experience but on screen or pad. Don't be deterred.

Two Cautions to Save You from Going Under

Don't let two other obstructions capsize you. These can be almost irresistibly tempting, particularly if you've just started writing or are still blushing in that new-in-love excitement about the project.

No Reading. Even though the pages you've done tempt like a pan of double-fudge brownies, do not go back and read them. This act disastrously invites your inner censor to surface again, which it does often enough without invitations to your pool party.

If you do succumb and go back and read, be ready for the censor to try to tow you under with that chorus of condemnations. In this case, reach for another flotation device by repeating to yourself, silently or aloud, awake or unconscious, day and night:

It's only my first draft.

It's only my first draft.
It's only my first draft.

You're allowed as many drafts as you can count to. Even if you already suspect that the current draft, as my novelist friend described of his work, will need hammer and saw, so be it. That's called writing. Just keep going.

Later, when you finally do read the draft, with some distance and maybe a few drinks, it may not be as bad as you thought. If it is, you'll have your tools sharpened.

No Telling. In your early zeal, you may feel the almost irresistible compulsion to talk to people about your work in progress. This urge usually starts with those closest, who can be easily cornered while they unload the van or watch their favorite television show. But after family has deserted you, your desire to share spills over to friends, acquaintances, and strangers. You confide in the carpool, divulge in the drugstore, blab on the bank line.

Unless you want to run dry faster than rain in the desert, curb yourself! Seasoned writers know this. When Atwood was asked about her current work in progress, she replied, "I'm not telling. Never, ever tell." [10]

I don't know whether it's a mystical phenomenon or the second thermodynamic law of writing, but telling saps doing. Telling siphons spontaneity. Telling drains enthusiasm. Telling flattens passion.

So, hold your breath and keep going.

Getting to the Other Side of the Pool

If you obey these commandments, they'll help you reach the other side of the jello pool. But, obeying, you still need one more flotation appliance: faith in yourself.

Keep grappling and paddling. Thrash about, if you have to. You'll bump up against blobs of bouncy resilience that land you nowhere. You'll feel like you're succumbing to deep-sea pressures that crush the life out of your resolve. But, as I assured my novelist friend, keep swimming in that jello.

You do have the strength to keep going.

Cultivate the little inner voice, great defeater of the censor, that keeps prodding you on. Trust it. It directs you toward the light out of the pool and onto the solid shore of creative production. The more you obey this voice, the more you'll be able to silence the pool monster that threatens to sweep you into the undertow and wash you out to sea.

Don't be afraid of the jello pool. Sink into it. As you accept it, in all its unease, your water pressure will stabilize and you'll learn how to roll through it. And you'll gain the reward: that wondrous and inexplicably natural feeling of thoughts flowing easily through your fingers.

So, if you feel yourself drowning in the writing pool of jello, remember that all of us, at some or many times in the work, flay about in our own personal pools. We swim under water and hold our breath. We meet amorphous, jiggling uncertainties and gasp for a cleared way. You can get through it. Just keep swimming.

ENDNOTES

[1]F. Scott Fitzgerald, from an undated letter to his daughter Scottie. *Quotations, University of South Carolina*.

<http://www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/quotes/quotes1.html>

[2]Nancy Kress, *Beginnings, Middles and Ends* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1993), p. 70. See also second edition, *Elements of Fiction—Beginnings, Middles and Ends* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2011).

[3]"Author Tim O'Mara on How to Avoid Writer's Block," *Writers Digest.com*, December 7, 2012. <http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/guide-to-literary-agents/really-good-reasons-not-to-write-and-how-to-get-around-them>

[4]For a good summary of different types of outlines, see Sarah Domet, "Choosing the Best Outline Method for You," *Writers Digest.com*, September 12, 2011. <http://www.writersdigest.com/whats-new/choosing-the-best-outline-method-for-you>

[5]Leonard Bishop, *Dare to Be a Great Writer* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1988), p. 178.

[6]Interview with Margaret Atwood by Kristin D. Godsey, "Unlocking the Door," *Writer's Digest* (April 2004), p. 48.

[7]Bishop, p. 179.

[8]Joan Didion, quoted in *Good Reads*.

<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/264509-i-don-t-know-what-i-think-until-i-write-it>. See also her words, "Was it only by dreaming or writing that I could find out what I thought?" *The Quote Garden*.

<http://www.quote garden.com/writing.html>

[9]Atwood in Godsey, p. 48.

[10]Atwood in Godsey, p. 49.

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Melody Mansfield's first novel, The Life Stone of Singing Bird, was published by Faber and Faber, Inc. to favorable reviews from The New York Times Book Review, Booklist, and others. Her short fiction, essays, and poetry have appeared in a variety of literary, academic, and commercial publications including Thought Magazine, Inside English, and Parent's Magazine. Her short story collection, A Bug Collection, was accepted for publication in 2013. Mansfield is currently at work on a number of projects, including a children's book; a novel about a young girl in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster; and a semi-autographical account of her own years as a ballet dancer in NYC. Mansfield is the Director of the Creative Writing Signature Program at Milken Community High School and is very pleased to have seen two of her students published in The Write Place at the Write Time.

Telling a Truth: A Practical Approach to Writing Memoir (and Other Fictions)

By Melody Mansfield

In one of the more perplexing of our idiomatic expressions, we sometimes talk about telling a lie (as if there must be many) or telling *the* truth (as if there can be only one.) This dichotomy not only assumes a clear and unassailable division between these two extremes, but also assumes one "truth" for every situation that can be not only universally understood but also universally agreed upon.

We know otherwise, of course.

Anyone who has ever witnessed a traffic accident can tell you that the “truth” of what occurred changes according to the position of the witness. Similarly, the “truth” of who is right or wrong in a domestic dispute is dependant upon a host of variables, many of which predate the existing argument and may even involve factors beyond the experiences of the two contenders.

Is it any wonder then, that the writing of memoir (and its many offshoots: autobiography, semi-biographical fiction, creative non-fiction, and simply fiction) is so difficult?

Joan Didion famously wrote that, “Writers are always selling someone out.” Just as disturbingly, Truman Capote once said that “All literature is gossip.” As someone who tries to live ethically and with as little collateral damage to others as possible, I find both of these positions deeply problematic. Consequently, I am one of those writers who does her best—for better or worse—to write *away* from herself whenever possible. And yet, I’m always there, in every piece of fiction, no matter how diligently I attempt to remove myself.

When a friend asked me to speak to this issue for a UCLA writing seminar last year, I was forced to really ask myself, first, what, exactly am I afraid of? and second, what is the range of options (between spilling your guts and distancing yourself completely) available to writers who are interested in writing about their own experiences?

In the process of preparing for the seminar, I came up with a list of questions you may want to ask yourself before undertaking this very frightening and rewarding endeavor. The trick here, for sections I – III, is to *be as honest with yourself as possible*. Remember, you are the only one who will see this. And once you have finished, I will, in turn, share with you my most honest responses, as well as some of my experiences with the approaches outlined in section IV.

I. *Why* are you writing this?

- a. To better understand an issue that has been troubling you?
- b. To transform pain into beauty?
- c. To unblock obsessions that are holding you back?

- d. To justify and defend your actions?
- e. To be vindictive and get revenge for past wrongs?
- f. Anything else? (Be honest here.)

My answers to Section I: *Why* are you writing this?

My answers here would include *a*, *b*, *c*, and sometimes, a little bit *d*. I've made my share of mistakes in life, and I have sometimes needed to play them out, fictionally, in order to figure out where I went wrong. This may or may not be useful to you, though there is a good chance it will be more useful to you as a person than it will be useful to you as a writer. Still, it may be something you will want to explore.

However, I would strongly caution you to *stay far away* from reason *e*. You are welcome to make one of your characters vindictive and vengeful—that can be a lot of fun—but if you bring that kind of negativity to your own reasons for writing, your readers will see it as self-indulgent and will, themselves, run the other way. (Better to come to terms with all that anger stuff before you sit down to write. Your readers have problems of their own and may have no patience for your thinly veiled self-analysis.)

II. *Which “truths”* do you want to explore?

- a. Factual?
- b. Emotional?
- c. Historical? Cultural? Societal?
- d. Anything else?

My answers to Section II: *Which “truths”* do you want to explore?

If I were going to rank these possibilities, I would generally place emotional truth at the top, and bump factual down to the very bottom. The others would hover somewhere in the shadowy middle, depending on the nature of my writing project. For instance, while writing about my experiences as a ballet dancer in 1970's NYC (see Section IV, *c*), one of my goals was to capture the historical and cultural flavors of this specific setting, as well as explore my own particular place in that turbulent time.

III. *What, exactly, are you afraid of?*

- a. Finding out things about yourself that you may not want to know?
- b. Exposing unsavory parts of yourself?
- c. Hurting someone?
- d. Anything else?

My answers to Section III: *What, exactly, are you afraid of?*

What am I afraid of? All of the above. And for good reason. The reality is that not everyone who reads our work will be on our side. In fact, beyond a few friends and teachers and loved ones, probably no one will care about what the act of writing will do *to us*. Readers may, in fact, be lying in wait for that one juicy nugget that might justify their own (possibly objectionable) actions.

But that's okay. Because good writing takes risks—linguistically, thematically, structurally, as well as in terms of content.

And because certain approaches and organizing strategies can give you at least some sense of control over your own feelings of vulnerability. We will discuss these in Section IV, below, but first, please go back to III, *a*: finding out things about yourself that you may not want to know.

As a writer, you *need* to know. This is the only way you can truly and honestly connect with your reader. And as a person, you probably need to know too, because this is the only way you can achieve true intimacy with the people who matter. So suck it up, dig deep, deal with whatever shows itself. And then take your time in deciding which parts you want to write down.

IV. What will be your *process* and/or *organizing strategy*?

- a. **Clothesline Approach:** air your dirty laundry, exactly as it is, and leave it to others to pass judgment or not
- b. **Patchwork Quilt:** piece together partial truths from a variety of contexts
- c. **Excavator:** mine real events for the treasures that may be hidden deep beneath the surface
- d. **Inventor:** invent new contexts in which to reveal emotional truths
- e. **Undertaker:** bury the most personal truths as deeply as possible and hope no one tries to dig them up

What follows is an attempt to give you a better understanding of each of these strategies by using my own writing as illustration. I invite you to categorize your own pieces in a similar manner. It may help you become more aware of the strategies you bring, consciously or unconsciously, to your own writing choices.

a. **Clothesline Approach.** One of my most successful stories, in terms of resonating most deeply with readers, is also the story that is perhaps most painful to me to read. “Blackout” is the most straightforward and factually true of my stories. It holds up a very small slice of time and examines it as linearly, accurately, and ruthlessly as possible. It is a difficult story for me to read, first, because it calls me back to a very difficult time in my life and second, because it violates one of the rules I just laid out for you in Section I, *e*. There may, in fact, be something vindictive going on here that makes me deeply uncomfortable. (My ex-husband does not come out looking too good in this story, and I am not proud of this.) I suspect also that this story embodies both the “selling someone out” part of Didion’s observation, as well as the “gossip” part of Capote’s. Perhaps the only redemptive part of this story (to me, as a writer) is that it allowed me to “unblock obsessions that were holding me back” (Section I, *c*). It was almost as if I had to write this story, before I could write anything else. (Thankfully, this is the only story of its kind, and I was able to move on, after this experience, to more artful forms of writing.)

b. **Patchwork Quilt.** A later story, “Bulk of Men’s Brains” takes a very different approach. Although it is also largely autobiographical, I was trying here to explore the emotional journey of the narrator, as well as her tendency to want to control things herself (at last!), along with her confusion in trying to decide where (geographically and metaphorically) her life would go next. I did this through a much more impressionistic, fragmented, “collage” (or patchwork quilt) of incidents and observations—some of which were factually true (or inspired by a factual truth) and some of which were wholly invented. This one is not told straight at all, but its goal is the same: to most effectively convey the emotional truth of the situation.

c. **Excavator.** My most recent novel took me forty years to get to. It is essentially a re-examination of three very vivid teenage years spent in NYC, on my own, as a ballet student at Balanchine’s School of American Ballet. It took me four decades to find a viable approach primarily because it was such a major turning point (sorry) for me at the time, and because I

continued, years later, to second-guess my choices. My motivations for writing this definitely fall into the I, *a* (to better understand an issue that has been troubling you) camp, as well as I, *b* (to transform pain into beauty) and, if I am brutally honest with myself, I, *d* (to justify and defend your actions.) I'll never know if I made the right choices then, but I can live with that because the questions raised in the writing of this novel made the whole process worthwhile. Does a writer need to wait until she can be objective before she can write a piece that is emotionally true? Or is a subjective, one-sided truth good enough? And what are the dangers—to one's self and to others (past, present, and future)—in writing something like this?

d. **Inventor.** An example of writing that is about as far from me as you can get and yet is designed to reveal emotional truths is my short story collection about bugs (entitled, predictably enough, *A Bug Collection*). The characters are bugs. And yet I am in there, everywhere—from the depressed honey bee, to the angry feminist mosquito, to the James Joycean millipede who locates the dark side of art, to... well, there are lots of them. But the point is, these stories each explore an aspect of the human condition that I (and most of you) have experienced. But by separating my stories from theirs and by inventing a new lens through which to examine them, I am able to delve even more deeply and objectively into the truths that lie therein.

e. **Undertaker.** My first novel, *The Life Stone of Singing Bird*, is set in the 1800s in a place I've never even driven through. This book began with a language-generated exercise in a writing class, but evolved into an exploration of a real life event that was so deeply traumatic and terrifying to me that there was no way I could deal with it straight on. So, although I did everything I could to avoid writing about myself and my situation, the incident—a fellow student, whom I liked and trusted, became my stalker—became the heart of the story. In this case, my goal was to bury the truths so deeply in fiction that no one could ever dig them up again.

All of which circles us back to the premise that in literature, as in life, the most compelling battles are generally not those between good and evil, but rather, those between good and good. Or, to put it even less elegantly, between doing the right thing and doing the righter thing.

Good writing is honest writing. But is honesty always the best ethical choice? Of course! Except in the cases where that honesty puts an innocent human being in danger, or breaks someone's heart, or violates sacred trusts, or exploits the tragedy of someone else's experience, or... in a million other ways, causes unwarranted collateral damage.

The inherent conflict between being a writer, who is honor-bound to tell the "truth," and a human being, who is honor-bound to do so in the most ethical way possible, is precisely what makes the task so difficult, and so important.

So how is one to write at all, when every choice is so fraught with danger? The only answer is a hard one: with a very conscious and deliberate control of the material. The kind of control that comes from asking yourself the hard questions and listening carefully to your answers. The kind of control that comes from not sharing your work with anyone until you have revised it into something so real and honest and true that it can only be fiction. The kind of control that understands how certain lies, constructed with care and compassion and creativity, can spawn potent and essential truths that are, like love, as perennial as the grass.

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