

On Burning Down the House or On Finding a Comfortable Writing Chair: My Work Methods

Just the other day, a neighbor stopped me on the street. He mentioned reading a few of my short stories, and without further preamble, his eyes locked mine. His gaze I understood, so intent, so fixed, portended the expectation that if he looked hard enough he might be able to see a panorama of oddball objects and people, fractured desires, oily possums and resurrection ferns, like a shower of floaters drifting off the back of my retina. "I'd sure like to see inside your head," he said softly. He is a therapist.

My own desire to see inside heads has plagued me from childhood and motivated me throughout my writing career. It is also what gave me pause mid-way to think that, despite competence as a writer, perhaps I could accomplish a greater good as a therapist. As a talk therapist, I could put my interviewer skills to work, closely listening and asking questions that supported individuals like myself who sought talk therapy as a way of finding answers hidden in their life stories. So in that season of rethinking, I began to re-school, to prepare myself for the pursuit of advanced degree(s) in psychology; this, even as I continued to write for a living. Then something providential happened, I participated in a fiction writing workshop at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) and thereafter was invited to teach in the JHU Odyssey program and then the Osher and MLA programs. Then Smithsonian Associates called. ...My vocation had found me, even if "lecturer" or "adjunct" and "honorariums" didn't pay the bills. But from that time, my life as a writer would evolve to higher levels of literary inquiry and emotional richness as a teacher and coach. And writing, as my student writers are quick to point out, is cheap therapy. I feel I am doing something worthwhile.

This background as teacher and writing coach has a lot to do with my work methods. I've incorporated into my own process, much of what I teach. I've listened to and read, and read again, astounding stories by people who have lead the most wildly adventurous, calamitous, inventive, or normal of lives. I've encouraged and counseled. I've squiggled and marked up pages like a zealous Jackson Pollock follower, providing honest, perhaps tough feedback, pushing new writers to improve their craft, and encouraging seasoned writers to take bigger artistic risks. With every story, I want the writer to know her tools, make decisions, take control. Plumb the depths. Find insight. Experience epiphany. Tall orders, yes. Or, at the least, I want the writer to know and remember that she has the permission to write. That the reward to writing will be more than the remembering and recording...that with any luck at all, she will discover an element of surprise, personal insight. There will be a thrill to it.

So let's say I know the tricks for getting a piece of my own writing started, have gotten to know my story characters, decided on a story problem and, probably, have conceived of a basic story strategy and/or structure, which will help me with how I approach and develop what I feel is of greatest importance, even before I know the story's course of events (unfathomable, I know, but not).

For my short story, "When Desire Can't Find Its Object," I chose description as the primary development strategy. In writing about identity and desire, not necessarily romance, the visual images (the objects) provide the psychological backdrop, a changing venue of ephemeral, unrealized connections (amphetamine enhanced, given it's the 1970s and the photographer has dropped a few tabs during and at the end of a fruitless 2000 mile drive to find the holy grail). There is a nuanced arc of opposing forces: the central character is unsatisfied with the things he has (a wife, a job, a house, a car that is paid for) and beset by the inability to fulfill even his niggling hungers: before he can photograph them, the egrets lift away like kites, his best friend's mother appears to lack appreciation for the poem he's written to her and attempts to turn him homeward, he wants a pastrami sandwich, a White Castle hamburger, an old woman's hand to hold--all withheld, his darkroom supplies have been tossed by his wife; in fact, there is a litany of beautiful, mysterious images he's been unable to capture on this fateful journey, then Iris makes a point of saying he's not allowed to take her picture, his wife wants to divorce him, he tries to help Iris with the ladder, holds her steady (a connection), is mocked by the photographs of her son and late husband that hang on the wall; finally, life as he knows it literally and figuratively unravels in "broken, twisted wires and strings." This is a risky story because I rely on the imagery with help from the story title to supply needed clues to what is at stake.

Objects are also central to the desires and identities of the characters who populate the jelly and thrift store in my hybrid novel-in-progress, *GOLD FISH CIRCLING ON A WREATH OF HAIR*. Again, the objects speak not to practical needs but to the psychological needs of their buyers.

Sensory perceptions (objects, landscapes, people) are key to the psychology of all of my fiction writing, and striving to paint memorable images with words is central to my work process.

Also key to the psychology and work process of *GOLD FISH CIRCLING ON A WREATH OF HAIR*, is its somewhat elegantly disjointed story structure, given I am conjoining such themes as intuition ("the eyes see just so much and the brain fills in the rest"), memory ("memory is a cumulus cloud") and storytelling ("There were no consequences for this—a story that fell out of order. There would always be someone to hear it again told another way."). My method is to write with neglect to the final story order, creating snippets of exposition and completing the narratives of frame stories before splicing them together within the overarching narrative.

Throughout the writing process, which includes throwing words out on their ears when they don't sound quite right or don't add meaning, I keep peeping into that flotsam that blurs my street vision to pull out curious bits--don't ask me where they came from. It's dreamlike in there and bits are shape changers. But I'm happy to examine each for texture and substance and then watch and listen as one bit mixes it up with the others. Mostly, it's after I've given the bits an essential work methods pep talk (that everything will be ok, that it's ok, that it's really ok, that it's good to take risks) that surprising, unknowable things will happen. And that's the beauty of it--the surprise of how far intuition will push your work methods into your story.

And here is one last confession on methods, a practical matter really: before I sit to write, I must find a comfortable writing chair (what's comfortable changes) and resist the temptation to burn down the house for all its distractions.

*My house's out of the ordinary
That's right
Don't want to hurt nobody
Some things sure can sweep me off my feet
Burning down the house*
TALKING HEADS, Speaking Tongues album