

THE WRITER'S NOTEBOOK



**Craft Essays
from
Tin House**

**THE
WRITER'S NOTEBOOK**



Tin House Books

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THE WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

INTRODUCTION

LEE MONTGOMERY

TO ME, WRITING is purely intuitive, so if I tried to illuminate anything about its craft, I'm afraid it would just result in a lot of arm waving. Thankfully, there are those who write criticism or "teach" writing who are brilliant at distilling and articulating the techniques of the written word. James Wood recently wrote a great book: *How Fiction Works*. E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* and John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* continue to be classics decades after their first publications. And personal favorites like *Fiction Writer's Handbook* by Hallie and Whit Burnett, the editors behind early *Story* magazine, can be helpful for those beginning to think about writing.

Still, despite these books, among countless others springing up all the time, many claim writing cannot be taught. The mysterious nature of creativity, the complexities of language, narrative, and form make the "teaching" of writing impossible. It is not brain surgery, as they say. Brain surgery can be taught. A writer's work remains elusive—like alchemy. Nevertheless, those of

us who work as writers, editors, teachers, and so forth stoically march forward trying to decipher writing's mysteries for others and ourselves. Over the last ten years, more and more books about how to write have been published. Some may be helpful. Others, which simplify the process into diagrams, plot points, page counts, and scene numbers, are plain silly: writing by number. It is the authority with which these authors (many unknown) distill the process into simple easy steps that is most entertaining. Like miracle diets—"Lose Ten Pounds in Ten Days"—we have the literary equivalent, "Five Steps to Great Characters." It appears the more grandiose the claim and prescriptive the advice, the more hilarious and far-fetched the reality.

During the early days of my life as a writer, I devoured all sorts of how-to books, from the aforementioned classics to the more absurd. The latter were my porno, my bad TV; they offered nothing of any value, really. I forgot everything shortly after I read it. The titles always included some type of promise like *Dare to Be Great*, *Write to Sell*, *Write to Break Out*, or *Write to Live*. Even if I could remember anything, I couldn't apply what I had learned. My writing brain lived in a faraway land; I could not find any direct route to this learning. The same thing happened in graduate school. The knowledge gained from reading, reading, reading, talking, talking, talking, and workshop, workshop, workshop sat in one impervious mound of dirt inside my head only to be doled out over time by an invisible (and stingy) hand.

I suppose there are those who find prescriptive advice about writing helpful, writers who can look at a project, identify a structure, use an outline, and get to writing. *One, two, three . . . poof!* But I cannot imagine a world where this is true, a world

where one creates great characters in five steps, a world in which one pops books out like laying eggs. In my world, writing is difficult and short cuts are few. The only real way to learn how to do it is to read the work of authors who write well and to, well, write—a lot. Along the way, of course, it is always helpful—and interesting—to talk or listen to writers discuss their process and the work of other writers.

Each summer since 2003, Tin House has been lucky to host writers from all over the country who come to Reed College in Portland, Oregon, to lead workshops and talk about the elements of great writing. By the end of the week, many of us who work at Tin House float around dreamily, humbled and inspired by the talks and readings we witness. Yes, the workshop is for the students, but editors and faculty rarely miss any seminars and panels. Listening to Dorothy Allison talk about place, Steve Almond about sex writing, Chris Offutt about revision, Pete Rock about “show” versus “tell,” Susan Bell about Maxwell Perkins’s editing of *The Great Gatsby*, and Jim Shepard about using history in fiction is not only fascinating but also essential. Listening to authors of this caliber speak about writing inspires and guides us, leading us to new places, to the work of unknown authors, or back to the work of the old masters.

Such is the spirit from which *The Writer’s Notebook* was born.

This little book with its title lifted from the journals of Somerset Maugham is not meant to be comprehensive. The seventeen pieces included here behave more like intimate conversations, like a notebook. Not all the essays were presented at the Tin House workshop. A few originated outside the workshop by writers whose work we admire, some of whom have published with the

magazine or books division. Margot Livesey's "Shakespeare for Writers," Jim Krusoe's "Le Mot Incorrect," Antonya Nelson's "Lost in the Woods," Rick Bass's "Keep It Simple," and Kate Bernheimer's and Lucy Corin's looks into alternative literary forms were written especially for this volume or excerpted from past lectures delivered elsewhere.

We at Tin House are tremendously proud of what we've been able to create with the summer workshop. Still, we agree that great writing cannot be taught, and make no such claim. Rather, we believe that great writing should be celebrated, and we are happy to share these celebrations with you.

PLACE

DOROTHY ALLISON

WHAT DO YOU notice when you first enter a story? Who is talking? Who are they talking to? Where are they standing? What's going on in the background? Is there a background?

There are two primary reasons why people read: boredom, which is my disease, and the need for reliable information, which is my constant motivation. I want to know everything. And I do, indeed, pick up books just to get the information that, in my upbringing, I missed. But I cannot tell you how many stories I pick up, and two people are having a conversation about their sex lives—which is a great place to begin, sex is always a good place to begin—but I don't know who they are, and I don't know where they are. It makes me crazy to step into a story and not know where I am. It makes me crazy when characters are arguing about sex, and I don't know what sex means for them. The story seems to take place in no place.

Most Americans no longer have the history of growing up in a town where their parents grew up and their grandparents grew

up and handed down stories about what came before. We no longer necessarily know the story of *nobody goes down that road at night because the colonel killed a bunch of people out there and the ghosts walk the roads*. Used to be that story was told for generations. No more. If you're American, you've probably moved at least three times in the last decade. You probably do not live where you were born. Almost surely, you do not live close to your parents. Almost surely, you have to invent the place that you are writing about.

And you're jealous of people you think come from a place that is generally recognizable—Southerners, who all have porches and pickup trucks and grandmothers (never mind that bunches of Southerners come from Atlanta); Bostonians, who can remember that last great blizzard that shut down the city; people from the Chicago projects; Jews from Staten Island or Queens or the Lower East Side, who eat pickles and go to the Second Avenue Deli and also have a grandmother. Everybody knows these places and the people in these places are all assumed to share the same food and the same language. Their place is a given.

But if you're from a place that no one knows, you have to invent it on the page.

I grew up among truck drivers and waitresses, and, for me, the place where most stories take place is the place that is no place for most other people. The truck stop: no place. The diner: no place. The grocery store: an empty landscape that you do not ascribe as being a real place. But for me those places are real places, with a population I recognize and can describe, a people I love even if they do not always love me.

I can give you detail. I can describe for you the tile they use

in most truck stops because truckers have a horrible tendency to puke after having drunk great quantities of beer on top of chili. I know the colors of those tiles. I know, in fact, why 7-Elevens are designed the way they are. I've worked there. I recognize why diners are the way they are—why, in fact, I'll make more money waiting on a booth than on the counter. Those places are real places for me. You probably read my stories to learn more about diners. And waitresses. And truck drivers. And I read to learn about the Jews in Brooklyn, the fishermen of Maine, and the combine drivers in Iowa. I'm lusting after those people I know little about: Bostonians who run along the Charles River in shorts even on snowy gray mornings, South Americans who live halfway up a hillside and speak Portuguese, Amish who somehow wound up in Hawaii and live out near Hilo and grow mangoes and passion fruit. All of these people are profoundly exotic to me, and I ache to know their secrets—especially their secret places.

Place is often something you don't see because you're so familiar with it that you devalue it or dismiss it or ignore it. But in fact it is the information your reader most wants to know.

When I went to college, I would sneak into other people's dorms and look in their rooms. I wasn't out to rob anyone but to learn about who they were and what they had. That, too, is place. All the stuff you've got that you don't see is place—and me, I am your reader, and I want to know all about it. Your reader comes into your narrative to steal knowledge—who you are and what is all around you, what you use, or don't use, what you need, or fear, or want—all that sweet reverberating detail. It is just like me going into those dorm rooms and taking a good solid look around. Your stuff provides telling details from which I can derive all kinds

of information about you. I can imagine your self-consciousness, your prejudices, your need to be in control, and maybe even what you are willing to risk or share or not risk or not share. I am making you up in my mind, deriving you from clues you provide, you and your story.

So let's review what place is.

Place is visual detail: manicured grass or scrubby weeds, broken concrete or pristine tarmac glistening with morning dew. Place is conditions: weather, atmosphere. Are the roads crowded or are they empty? When you step outside your house in the morning and you hit that clean, cool sidewalk, are there people walking around? Are they looking at you or are they looking away? Are you lonely? Are you nervous?

Place requires context. Is it responsive? Does it notice me? Or is it porcelain, pristine, and just ignoring my passage through? Are there people on the street who flinch when I smile at them? Is there a reason they do that? Place is where the "I" goes. Place is what that "I" looks at, what it doesn't look at. Is it happy? Is it sad? Is it afraid? Is it curious?

What I am trying to say is that place is not just landscape—a list of flora and fauna and street names. That's not place, that's not even decent research. Which brings me to my other point.

I cannot abide a story told to me by a numb, empty voice that never responds to anything that's happening, that doesn't express some feelings in response to what it sees. Place is not just what your feet are crossing to get to somewhere. Place is feeling, and feeling is something a character expresses. More, it is something the writer puts on the page—articulates with deliberate purpose.

If you keep giving me these eyes that note all the details—if you tell me the lawn is manicured but you don't tell me that it makes your character both deeply happy and slightly anxious—then I'm a little bit frustrated with you. I want a story that'll pull me in. I want a story that makes me drunk. I want a story that feeds me glory. And most of all, I want a story I can trust. I want a story that is happening in a real place, which means a place that has meaning and that evokes emotions in the person who's telling me the story. Place is emotion.

So I'm going to say some unscrupulous, terrible, horrible things that are absolutely true in my mind, if not in yours:

Central Florida is despair.

New York City is sex.

California is smug.

Boston has never gotten over Henry James.

Seattle and Portland lie about their weather.

Iowa City is one hotel room and a chlorine stink away from the suburbs of hell.

I keep a list. I keep track of the places I have been and what I have decided about those places from stories I have experienced or read or heard or dreamed. It's a writer's game, but also a game for anyone who grew up with a sense of not knowing much and trying to figure out what everyone else knows or thinks they know.

NOW I'LL TELL you the place I don't want.

A motel in Iowa City whose windows open onto the swimming pool. Have you been there? Not a Motel 6 or a Days Inn. Probably a Sheraton, maybe the Hyatt, but more likely the Marriott, and definitely not the Four Seasons.

For a year I took a picture of every motel room I stayed in. I lined them up. The only thing different as the year went on was that I was more and more often in rooms with minibars. And you could tell it was a minibar. That was the only difference I could see. The bed is always the bed. There is always a TV; there is always a remote control. Sometimes there are extra pillows. Sometimes there aren't.

It's nowhere. It's no place. And there you are.

If you're lucky, Oprah is on at eleven thirty at night. And you can check out what she's done lately. Try, try, try not to start channel-hopping and watching the ads. You can't afford any of that stuff anyway. It's the middle of the night, three o'clock in the morning, and you're in a room in which the art on the wall is a stylized painting of a flower or an unknown landscape. And I do mean an unknown landscape. Someone is doing these paintings and making money, but it's not an actual artist and that landscape is nowhere you recognize. Also, the mattress is kind of soggy, and you've got one of those covers that you are too hot if you have it on you and too cold if you pull it off. You're awake at three o'clock in the morning and you are nowhere; this is not a place.

Hyatts, Sheratons—that's where all those stories take place in which there is no landscape, in which there is not the mention of a tree or the grass or the weather. There is no weather in a Hyatt. Stories that take place in no place—why would you leave

out the thing that will most bring alive what you're trying to do? You think the most important thing is that confident voice of that "I" narrator who, let's be clear, is really you when you were twenty-two, and they didn't treat you right, didn't fuck you right, didn't love you right—Momma, first lover, Daddy, I don't care who it was. But I want the story to burn me. I want the page to crisp my fingers.

You were in that room with him when he said no, he did not want you, and you walked out of the room and it felt as if you were bleeding into your own belly. You went down the stairs, out into the night, and you smelled—what did you smell? Was there the distinct odor of spilled beer on the steps? Were you thinking about how when your daddy left that was all that you could smell on the front steps after he was gone? Is it torn-up weeds that you smell? Somebody was sitting on those steps earlier and she was crying, and she didn't have anything else so she reached down and pulled up the grass and ripped it, and you can smell the torn grass in the air.

Or is it your own skin? You had put on perfume. You had bathed carefully. You had washed your hair. You had used that new soap with lavender scent and flowers. You wanted to be wanted, and no one can ever understand how terrible it felt to be told, no, I don't want you. But you smell your skin, and it stinks of sour disappointment, and *you* don't want you. You can understand why he didn't want to have sex with you. That's place—the smell in the air, the memory, the association. It's all history. You are somebody real who comes from somewhere, and you have been hurt in specific, deep, terrible ways.

Or, it could be that other story.

You have been cared for and loved and made joyful. You expect good things. You expect love. Take a deep breath and what do you smell? Mmmm. You've opened your suitcase and your mother, or your girlfriend, or—oh, my God—your husband of one year who still gets tears in his eyes when you reach for him has tucked something inside. You open up the suitcase and lying there, wrapped in plastic, carefully prepared, is a sugar cookie with anisette. The smell is enough to make your whole body flush with lust. You open it up and breathe it in; you won't eat it now. You think about it. Your mother or your lover or your husband or your best friend sneaked that in there for you to find. You are a person to whom wonderful things happen. And tonight, tonight, when you come back to the Hyatt, more wonderful things will happen. The manager will have left chocolates and a bottle of some perfect complimentary wine, with a glass sitting by it waiting for you, or maybe there will be strawberries dipped in chocolate. You are a person to whom wonderful things happen.

That's place, a place more of us should get to more often.

Place is people.

Place is people with self-consciousness.

Place is people with desire.

My major reason for reading stories is that I get off on knowing other people's secrets. On every level, I get off—I tremble from the power of the sexual charge of the secret and the electrical excitement of suddenly discovering the connections I never made before. I want to know everything and so I need an actual person walking the landscape, responding to it, telling me, in fact, how he or she wound up there. What was the decision-making

process? Who is that person in this place? I need to know the person walking the landscape, seeing the landscape, remembering another landscape, putting that landscape on top of this landscape. Then suddenly I'm not in one place, I'm in two places. And there's a narrator, and the narrator is making language choices, and that's a landscape. It's a landscape on the page.

Story is negotiated. Story happens from what we put on the page and what the reader takes off the page. The reader does not always take off the page what we imagine we have put there. Because, as I said, there's a whole bunch of stuff you don't even see anymore. And you don't know who your reader might be. When I read your story, I read it with my imagination and my landscape, my sense of place. I can see the place you tell me only through the filter of the places I can imagine, unless you're really good. And it's not going to be good enough just to tell me that a place is all red brick and that kind of off-white limestone. That's not sufficient. I grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, with clapboard houses. No bricks. What I have is the landscape in which I grew up and the landscapes that I have adapted from every damned book I've ever read, and every damned book I've ever read is in the back of my head while I'm reading yours. Every place every other writer has taken me is in me.

Can you take me somewhere no one else has?

Can you show me a place I don't already have a reference for?

Place is the desire for a door. Place is the desire to get out of where you are. Place is experiencing where you are as a trap. Are you in hell on your way to heaven? Are you momentarily safe in heaven, fearful of falling into hell? Characters that interest me, about whom I am most curious, are always engaged in a journey.

Fear is a wonderful place for writers. A character who is genuinely terrified is in the best place because the reader is going to be terrified as well. The reader is going to be sweaty, anxious, wanting something to happen, turning pages. It's a better place if there are loud noises about which a character is not entirely sure of the cause. Fearful places. The lights have gone out, and the rain's coming down so hard, and loud, she can't hear anything, and it's dark and somebody might be chasing her and she's running and the floor is slippery. The tiles are slippery, they're old and they're worn and she's barefoot and sweaty and sliding, and she thinks she can hear somebody coming behind her. She can hear his boots. She can smell his sweat. He's close enough that she can smell him. He's real. Oh God! He's so damn close! And you know what? You know what?

It's better if the fear is real.

You're sitting at home. You're reading this essay. The lights aren't going to go off; it's not raining. There's nothing to be afraid of. Probably not, anyway. Unless, wait. It's not just anybody running up the hall; it's you—not second-person you, first-person YOU. I'm describing you; I'm in your body. Now, how do I make you know this? How do I make you know you're running up the hall, and you're terrified, and sweat's pouring off you, and you're sliding on the slippery linoleum, and the person behind you with a knife is somebody you have reason to be afraid of?

I'm going to use specific details. I'm going to put you in Portland, Oregon. It's July. It's the last night of a writing conference. Everybody was drinking heavy. The students were all exchanging addresses and phone numbers. And you, you wouldn't give

this one guy your phone number. You were feeling really full of yourself because your workshop teacher liked that story you showed her and she said she wanted to read the rest of it and you could send it to her, and you were just feeling so good, and good stuff happens to you, it always does. And you go back to the dorm later than you'd planned, but there's nobody else in the dorm. Listen. It's raining. And the back door slams and there he is. And you didn't give him your phone number, and he's like, "Who the fuck do you think you are?" He's coming up the hall and you're barefoot and you're sweating and you're running and the lights go out and it's raining hard. And just before the lights go out, you see what he has in his hand: he's going to gut you from front to back. Run hard, run fast. It's a specific place. It is your specific tender body that your momma loves so much. That's place.