

The First Sentence

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When I started rereading what I had written in the early 1980s, I was slow to recognize my writing – no doubt an indication that writing is, like a living organism, prone to growth and change. And just as we change, so does our writing, and what/how I write now may well be quite different tomorrow.

The import of the above statement is that creative writing does not have one defining characteristic. Creative writing can be done in so many different ways, with the approaches, ideas and rituals involved subject to constant change, even for the same writer.

It is not easy to talk about writing and its rituals.

Sitting with a pencil in hand (for those still using writing implements) or in front of a computer screen is one of these rituals, and only the first.

Every writer writes in his/her own way according to his/her personality, and there is no absolute pre-requisite to the act of sitting down and writing. From my vantage-point, the common thread in all creative writing is that it constitutes the only moment of certainty in the life of writers.

What truly exercises me, however, is the first sentence: how shall I begin?

That first sentence is the torment of most writers. The Turkish Nobel Prize laureate Orhan Pamuk claims to rewrite his first sentence 50 -100 times. Canadian writer Margaret Atwood says that if you place your left arm on the table and raise your right hand in the air for long enough you will stumble on a story. When she was asked if she followed her own advice, her answer was “No, I don’t need to.”

I find that what other writers counsel or suggest does not generally hold true for me. For my part, I write on whatever is available: papers lying in my car, paper napkins or even menus in cafes and restaurants, the margins of newspapers, or the back of electricity bills and purchase receipts. Going over all the ideas I jotted down earlier, I have often found my way out of an impasse I may have reached with one of my story’s characters or plotlines.

Sometimes I begin with an idea that I’ve been mulling over; or a snatch of overheard conversation; or a news item from the paper; or a scene I have witnessed. Sometimes, just an advertising slogan glimpsed on a billboard while driving will set off a train of thought or images in my mind.

I go back and forth between writing by hand and using a computer. Every so often, I gather everything I have jotted down – on stray pieces of paper, in my office planner or the little writing journal I keep, as well as on supermarket receipts and the backs of faxes that land in my office, or on conference papers where my notations have nothing to do with what I am listening to; even on the “tickets” that I get after parking my car in No Parking spaces – something I do habitually. I recognize that this way of proceeding exposes me to some writing “loss” – thus, for example, when I found a fairly long piece of narration that was supposed to go into my first novel, *B as in Beirut*, after the book had appeared.

Is this perhaps because my writing resembles my life? I wrote my first novel during the Lebanese civil war when I went back and forth between the two Beiruts (East and West), or between Beirut

and the mountains – hence the fragmented and unsettled nature of the writing in that story which mirrored my life at the time.

I proceed by writing scene fragments, which I rework into a narrative structure using elements of collage and free expression, as well as poetry. I then type into my computer all the handwritten fragments. This fragment-gathering sometimes takes longer than I anticipate: there are papers everywhere as I type up the various fragments separately, and only incorporate them into the main body of the story after I have rewritten them. The fragments thus become kernels from which an entire chapter will emerge, or I attach them to a chapter I have already written.

For me, a novel is a continuous act of construction: it takes shape incrementally, not in a linear fashion, but in a sequence of alternating and differing forms as the writing progresses. Scene fragments form the core of my characters, and these characters grow as I pursue the process of writing scenes and dialogues, in a manner reminiscent of film.

I don't write in a chronological fashion but rather in a circular one. Sometimes I go back to where I had started, and sometimes not. As I write, the question of chronology is irrelevant. I may start at the end and then go back to the beginning because there is an inner logic that I submit to when writing which has nothing to do with the sequence of events. Sequencing is a secondary consideration which I craft later. It is what I see in my mind's eye as well as the characters' situations that drive the narrative, not the unfolding of a time-line.

After I have incorporated the new fragments into the body of the story, I print fresh copies – it is something that I find upsetting, I mean all that paper. When I reread and edit, I do so using a hard-copy of what I wrote, making corrections or revisions with a pencil. I always use a pencil, not a pen, because I am unsure that the changes I am making are final. Sometimes the manuscript will lie unfinished without my going back to it – usually, a sign that there is some kind of problem with the characters or that I have led them into a situation from which I am unsure how to proceed. And so at times, I end up throwing away a lot of paper into the waste-basket, forgetting all that I have written, save for a few sentences here and there which stay with me and become the starting-point of a new piece of writing or text.

The advent of computers has of course revolutionized the writer's work. In the advanced stages of writing *Bas in Beirut* I wasn't yet comfortable with computers. I wrote by hand, and then rearranged and reordered the paragraphs and their contents either physically, with a pair of scissors, or by crossing out entire chunks and rewriting. Now, I just press a key and the sequence of paragraphs is rearranged: whether that alters a writer's relationship to the text remains a question for me.

That question notwithstanding, writing is first and foremost a journey of discovery. There is of course a huge difference between reality and writing about it. But writing about reality is quintessentially a journey and in this writing journey, we write about what we know. Understanding what we know, or rather explaining it, is not as important as writing it as *we* understand it or experience it. In my new novel, currently being finished, there is a grandmother figure called Naheel to whom everyone attributes a legendary and mysterious power to influence the lives and destinies of others. I recount all of this without intervening, without trying to explain this extraordinary power of hers, or to analyze the connection between the things she says and what happens to people. I do not think it is my task to explain. That I understand what is going on in no way means that I insert

myself as a narrator and explain this almost blinding force that Naheel possesses, but that I accept her and tell her as she is.

The process usually starts as a sea of ideas swirling in my head, which I know neither how to organize or set out on the page. As I said earlier, writing that first elusive sentence formally marks the beginning. I aspire to write what I know, things that are exquisitely simple. They seem obvious, and I know all about them, and yet, before a blank sheet of paper or computer screen they are hard to capture. Thus in that moment of committing to writing what I know for sure I have the feeling that I have lost all my moorings.

All of them ... in spite of my unwavering faith in the nature of creative writing as the only instant of certainty, everything feels adrift.

This feeling of total uncertainty is the portal to both heaven and hell, as the drift carries the writer in so many different directions, far exceeding the four cardinal ones, with memory, imagination, the recreating of meaning and the manipulation of word order offering an infinite number of possibilities.

When I started *B as in Beirut*, I did not know that it would turn into a novel. I just needed to unearth my own words, to give them utterance. The characters were born as the narrative developed because we cannot put all the words one has in the mouth of only one character. Making up a character is also an opportunity to say what we want and to create the dynamic interplay between people, place and time that develops with the story-line and the unfolding of events.

That much is autobiographical in the characters we create is indisputable. It is a given. We create characters as vehicles for our own utterances and no one character can possibly express everything we have to say. Sometimes, we need to express our utter lack of faith in any certainty or certitude whatsoever. In so doing, we create a fully-fledged character without impeding the development of its own inner logic.

What I have just said appears contradictory.

Sometimes, we intervene in a character's place in the development of the story, and we decide whether to give it voice, or not, or whether the character is necessary to the plotline. In *B as in Beirut*, I could have bestowed speech on Josepha, one of the main protagonists. Instead I chose to disperse statements associated with her throughout the text. Perhaps this was due to the fact that she is stronger than me, and I was afraid that I would lose control of her or be unable to contain her; maybe it was because there was no way to stop talking about her and I couldn't close the door behind her, like I did with Warda, the other character who went to her death in a drowning accident or suicide in the ocean.

In my second novel, *Wild Mulberries*, the narrator, Sara, recounts her story and that of her family as it unfolds in the interval between the two world wars, which wrought major social and economic changes in Lebanon. In order to recount the history of a family, a village, and a society, I had to come up with an all-encompassing character. Despite the fact that Sara is nothing but an invention and does not actually exist in "real life", it is not impossible to conceive that she might exist.

Thus, we are able to create a character to recount reality as we see it.

In writing, we learn to be ourselves on a daily basis. With every word that we write, we doubt the truth of its authenticity. Is it really mine? In that sense, writing is like being born over and over again. It is as if we had no cognitive memory, or any received knowledge. In searching for it, we fashion our own language. While undoubtedly difficult, that is what creative writing is about.

Iman Humaydan is a Lebanese columnist and novelist whose works include *B as in Beirut* (1997) and *Wild Mulberries* (2002), whose English translation was a runner-up for the 2009 Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation. Her third novel, *Hayawat okhra*, is scheduled for publication this year.