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### **Writer Rules: What I Go By**

Before we embark on making rules for writing, let us look at the nature of the enterprise. What is it that we are making rules for? We are making rules for the creative process, a process that has always been elusive and intriguing. Writers themselves are mystified by it, never quite being able to explain how they write. At its most romantic, creativity implies freedom, a lack of restraint and so making rules is tantamount to straitjacketing the process, which would be anathema to any “creative person.”

I think of the writing of fiction as a process of making sense of the world, of exploring the human condition and trying to understand the world we live in.

The spur or impulse to your fiction can come from any direction and express itself in a variety of forms. You may believe that fiction is a way to explore your beliefs, to espouse your dearly held causes – you may decide to write a novel of ideas. Or is your novel a chronicle of social observations, of the way people – all Pascal’s mice – behave towards each other in a novel of manners in the best tradition of Jane Austen and Edith Wharton? Will you write a novel that uses history as its bannister, or vice versa, history that uses fiction as its staff? Or do you want to put all the interesting people you have known together and weave a plot around them – the character-driven novel? Or if you see an uplifting piece of scenery, a sunrise or a sunset or a certain angle of light and are transported, do you want to recollect that emotion in tranquility and write a “mood” novel? Your novel may have that unique voice or that ground-breaking structure that will set undergraduate courses agog the world over. Perhaps your novel is a bit of all of the above.

But however carefully and completely you have gathered your material and thought out the form and structure, you are just preparing the ground. For there has to be a spark, a match must be struck to ignite all your sources of inspiration and create a hot rush in your head, which must translate into words on paper. That, to me, is the creative process. And how closely the words on paper mirror the ferment in your head and heart, whether they are, in the words of Virginia Woolf, “a film of wax pressed close to the graving in the mind” is the test of creative success. And you are answerable to no one but yourself for it.

This again, the first rush of words, is only the beginning. What you have before you is the uncut diamond. You have to use the tools of your craft to chisel and polish, you have to bring to bear your style as a craftsman and your sensibility as a human being on your material – and the two have to fuse seamlessly on paper. If fiction is the personal expression of a subjective truth, the mode of expression constitutes the writer’s style and the subjective truth, her perception. Bernard Malamud underscores the importance of form when he says that “form as ultimate necessity is the basis of literature. ... Freedom of thought doesn’t necessarily lead to art. Free thought may come close to self-deceit [if it] interferes with the logic of language and construction...”

So, even if you have the most brilliant story to tell, you cannot tell it however you want – there is a certain form that the telling has to take, some ‘rules’ that you have to conform to.

I cannot presume to prescribe rules for others, but here are some rules of thumb, a mix of practical tips and admonition that I have worked out for myself.

1. Routine is important. Once you are working on a project, organise your schedule around it. Try and write every day even if you know it is not going right and you will probably edit it all out the next day. Sitting at your desk and just thinking about your work while you doodle is effective. As Thomas Edison said, genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. It helps to write at a fixed time every day. I prefer to write early in the morning.
2. I like to write in longhand, on paper not just because I am reassured by the sight of my handwriting but also because it saves my initial thoughts, phrases, sentence constructions and logic which I often find myself coming back to and which might not get saved on a computer. The computer is an impatient if efficient device and does not take kindly to the lingering, wool-gathering writer.
3. Read as much as you can. Re-read the classics that inspired you to write in the first place, and renew your energies. Read your contemporaries, with enjoyment certainly, but also with an eye to how they write and construct their books. The best works will not yield their devices easily, but you can find pointers. A book that I reviewed recently helped me resolve a problem of dealing with shifts in time in the historical novel and resolve a knotty point on historical markers. A critical reading may help you avoid certain mistakes or give you the courage to do something that you have been toying with but not made up your mind about. If you are ready to learn you will be surprised at how much you can learn from the most unexpected sources. Be open to other art forms like cinema, theatre, even painting and music.
4. Take your writing seriously, not yourself. “Creativity” does not mean lack of discipline or license and you get no brownie points for being “creative.” Writers can become very self-centred and self-indulgent, and in many ways, writing fiction is one of the most unnecessary activities on earth. You chose to become a writer; the world does not owe you anything for being one. You may think you are writing deathless prose but the sad truth may be that your book is just one more object added to the world.
5. So, it is a good idea to get a day job, at least part-time. It keeps you connected with the world and with people on neutral terms, which is very important for a writer of fiction. (I believe that it does writers good to travel by bus and stand in queues and get insulted by bus conductors and government clerks.) It also helps to keep you from thinking of your writing and yourself all the time, apart of course, from subsidising your writing since very few writers of fiction make enough money to sustain themselves. But it makes sense if your other job feeds into your writing in some way. My day job as the editor of an academic journal helps me refine my skills in

language, the logic of construction and the fine points of structure while not intruding into my creative space.

6. Edit your writing as you would that of a stranger from whom you expect nothing but the best. (It is good to have a gap between the writing and the editing of a draft, and it would not be wise of you to edit your work if you are being very hard on yourself or very charitable.) When you are in the right frame of mind, be ruthless, be ready to let go of your pet phrases and sentences. I always tell myself that a gush of words produces a slush of prose. The aim is to write fiction and not be, in the immortal words of Muriel Spark, a “pisseur de copie” or a urinator of journalistic copy. Raymond Carver, in his essay “Principles of a Story,” quotes the writer Evan Connell who said he knew he was finished with a short story when he found himself going through it and taking out commas and then going through the story again and putting commas back in the same places.

When the time comes, trust your editor and remember that you are both on the same side – the side of good, effective writing. But at the same time, trust your instincts; if you feel your editor is not sympathetic to your writing, or does not understand the context of your work or the reason you have chosen a certain phrase, make a convincing case for yourself, not “but it is *my* book.”

7. If the writing is coming too easily, distrust it. I believe that the struggle, the tension of converting thought into words must be reflected in your form. For myself, I like my writing to be textured, to have some roughage (which does not mean sloppy or careless writing). Every writer’s work should be distinctive, even idiosyncratic. To extend Denise Levertov’s comment on poetry to fiction (and thanks to my fellow writer Joel Toledo for this quote), “Poems present their testimony as circumstantial evidences and not as closing argument.” So what one looks for is a tangential truth, even a tentative blundering and not the slick, the glib, the self-evident.
8. Finally, it is important for writers to protect themselves. Writing, or the impulse for writing comes, in many ways, from a place of uncertainty, of credulity, of vulnerability, even stupidity, and we must be what we are, our disabilities included. We have to believe, as Doris Lessing says in *The Blue Notebook*, “in our own beautiful impossible blueprints.” You have to own your way of seeing the world, of dealing with it and you must do it without being apologetic.

In conclusion, what do we hope to achieve with all these rules, with our writing? In her essay “Love, actually,” Zadie Smith speaks about first encountering the possibilities of fiction when she read E M Forster’s *A Room with a View* as an eleven-year-old. She ‘loved’ the book and felt that it had done her good. Later she realised that serious people did not speak of fiction this way and when she became intellectually responsive to the text, she was shameful of her initial affective response. For “There is something about love that does not sit well with the literary academy.” As writers I think it is this quality that we have to

capture in our writing, this basic impulse of love which drew us to fiction in the first place, that we have to rediscover and transmit.

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