The Art of Writing Novels

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Joanne Leedom-Ackerman, an award-winning journalist, won immediate acclaim with the publication of her short story collection, ***No Marble Angels****. Her current book is the bestselling novel,* ***The Dark Path to the River****.*

When I was younger, I held slabs of ice together with my bare feet as Eliza leapt to freedom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* I went underground for a time and lived in a room with a thousand light bulbs, along with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. And I was in the corner of the barn watching with awe as Rose of Sharon bared her breast and nursed a starving man in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.

The power of the imagination to take an author's images, scenes, and characters and to bind them to one's own life, to draw from them wisdom *and* experience, makes the reading of a novel an intimate act which television, movies, and even plays can't equal. The novel's unique power comes in part from the personal nature of both its creation and reception. A novel is the product of one writer, working alone in a room, distilling experience, history and myth through his or her imagination and turning out a story. The reader is also alone, interacting from the basis of personal history.

For every novel written, there are different stories of its genesis and gestation. However, there are also some generalities which I think will hold, for novelists from wide-ranging backgrounds and time periods and working habits seem to have found common ground.

One generalization is that the novel creates the writer as much as the writer creates the novel. The novelist studies writing technique by reading and writing constantly. But the best novels are products of vision and sensibility as well as narrative technique.

In an essay in his book *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison notes,

> . . . as I continued, I made a most perplexing discovery; namely, that for all his conscious concern with technique, a writer did not so much create the novel as he was created by the novel. That is, one did not make an arbitrary gesture when one sought to write. And when I say that the novelist is created by the novel, I mean to remind

> you that fictional techniques are not a mere set of objective tools, but something much more intimate: a way of feeling and seeing and of expressing one's sense of life. And the process of *acquiring* technique is a process of modifying one's responses, of learning to see and feel, to hear and observe, to evoke and evaluate the images of memory and of summoning up and directing the imagination; of learning to conceive of human values in the ways which have been established by the great writers who have developed and extended the art. And perhaps the writer's greatest freedom, as artist, lies precisely in his possession of technique; for it is through technique that he comes to possess and express the meaning of this life.

Thus viewed, technique for the novelist begins with how he sees life. The writing of a novel demands a certain truth-telling. It is not an act of will so much as an act of listening. Learning to listen to the characters and story is part of learning technique.

Harriet Beecher Stowe felt she was possessed by her story. Over the years she had witnessed or read about the events of slavery. She had read a newspaper account of a young slave woman fleeing over the icy Ohio River with her child. Stowe herself had had a black child whom she taught in a school in her home be suddenly seized from his mother and taken back to Kentucky and put up for auction. She had listened and watched, but it wasn't until she felt impelled to begin writing that her characters and story took her over. When her publisher suggested that she must keep her book shorter because she was writing on an unpopular subject which might be hard to sell, she replied that she did not make the story, that the story made itself, and that she could not stop until it was done.

Stowe, Ellison, and Steinbeck all took on the politics of their times. They used individual experience to create archetypes in character and develop stories which became

myths of American life. Politics by its nature is a group activity, the expression of the group's will, but fiction in its essence is individual, rooted in character and emotion. Learning the difference is also an essential part of mastering the techniques of fiction.

The writer learns, Ellison has noted, "that he is involved with values which turn in their own way, and not in the way of politics, upon the central issues affecting his nation and his time."

Ellison, Steinbeck and Stowe are among the writers I've turned to in studying both technique and values. I hesitate to insert personal experience in the company of such writers, but I presume to do so because they have been my teachers.

Growing up in the South in the 1950s and 60s, I spent much of my early years debating issues of civil rights with family and friends. For a long time I located the antagonist outside myself, in politics, society and culture; thus I could separate myself from it. I became a journalist, and as a reporter in the East, I gathered facts and statistics and social opinions and searched for answers to issues. But all the while other stories were building in me which couldn't so easily be contained in facts and figures and social theory. I didn't call these stories a novel because I didn't know how they would end. But I knew the face of the emotion I wanted to address and the face of a character or two. I also knew two sentences. The first: "The girl did not belong." The second: "There are no marble angels in potter's field." That first sentence is the opening of "The Tutor," one of the stories in the short story collection *No Marble Angels*. The second sentence didn't survive, at least not in that form though its remnant is in the title story.

Let me quote from the opening scene of "The Tutor":

> The girl did not belong. It was obvious to those watching her walk up Shenandoah Avenue. Under her arm she carried a notebook and a shopping bag. She moved slowly down the street, her eyes darting from side

to side, large, curious eyes peering out from under her bangs, observing the squat brick houses, the people on their stoops. Those watching thought perhaps she was a welfare worker making her rounds. Every few steps she glanced into her notebook then again scanned the porches. She smiled, a shy, tentative smile which asked these strangers to smile back at her. It was her smile, her peculiar bidding, which hinted to the neighbors she was not from welfare.

Others watching guessed she was a walker, out soliciting business. Tight jeans, loose shirt. "Hot tonight, baby, right hot." One of the locals clucked as he sidled up beside her. She glanced at the pavement and walked faster. Hips set high, a little wide, legs long and slim, breasts small under the cotton shirt. She dodged these men like the hockey player she'd been in college, not like a jane on the make. "Hey, green jeans, where you going?" the men called. She flashed a cautious, not-to-be-rude smile then hurried down the block without looking back. On the porches the women, on the streets the men, watched this white girl passing.

At No. 14 Shenandoah, the girl stopped. She shut her notebook and climbed the broken steps to the porch. She ran her hand around the waist of her slacks, tucking in her shirt; then she brushed fingers through her short dark hair. She started towards the front door but stopped. The house looked empty. The shades were drawn, the windows patched with the *Afro American*. The window frames, swollen past their shape, had been stuffed with rags, and she could see no light inside. On the rotten post which propped up the porch she read a message scrawled in red, "Fuck Them Zoro Lives!", scrawled anonymously then covered over and over with paint by whoever lived there, painted over and over again.

She finally moved to the door and knocked.

Silence.

She knocked again.

From between a chain lock, a face peered out.

"Who you?"

"I'm . . . I'm the tutor." She disliked that word. "I'm Shannon Douglass, is your mother home?"

"Ma-a-a-!" the voice shouted down the hall. "That tutor lady's here."

The door shut, then opened. She had begun.

So I began a journey of my own by considering experience from the inside out. With that scene I began my first novel, and gradually my writing and direction changed, from the journalistic consideration of the body politic, culture, society, to the consideration of the individual heart, from the objective to the subjective. With this change grew a conviction that the individual, heeded through art, could illumine a whole.

It seems to me now that this illumination comes at the point when one's experience and imagination intersect and take flight. By experience I don't necessarily mean the day-to-day events of one's life, but one's emotional knowledge. As a writer or as anyone who is able to take that knowledge and extend it and apply it both to himself and outside of himself, he is able to encompass larger worlds while at the same time closing the distance between the self and the other until that distance often fades and instead becomes the shadow of one's own face.

Writers are often asked: did that really happen? Is that just you you're writing about, disguising yourself as tall and thin and calling yourself Sue? I've never yet heard a writer give a direct answer to that question, I'm sure because however close one may start to one's own experience, something else happens in the process. Characters have minds of their own. They tell you: that may be your life, but this is mine so sit back and listen. If you're smart, you do; and a larger life experience begins to take over. As the writer listens to his characters and to their story, he takes down the world the way they see it,

shaping it according to their experience, which is never quite the same as his own.

I don't mean to mystify the process, but after a novelist has studied his craft, studied the tools of narrative, scenes, dialogue, monologues, exposition, after he has studied the subject he's writing about, after he has sharpened his pencils, he is then left alone in a room with a sheet of paper and himself. As he listens, his characters will begin to offer him clues of the story he is to tell: a coin, a flower, a gesture, a word. If the writer doesn't rush them or force them, the characters will unfold their story, much of which the writer may already know, and yet the characters always know more than he and will reveal it only in the process of the writing.

I'd like to end with part of a letter from John Steinbeck to his editor Pascal Covici during the writing of *East of Eden*

> . . . this book is growing so fast that I can't keep up with it. I don't know what I am going to do. I told you that every part of it had pups. That's the trouble. And here is another thing that is almost frightening, the story comes to me as though I were reading it but not in its final form. Then I must take the story I have heard in my ears and set it down. It is a very curious thing and one that is driving me.