

SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY MASTER CLASS 3/07/02

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Genre: Research

I have been asked how much I devote myself to obtaining experience to put together for a novel, and how much I find intuitively.

I would say that if you're a good novelist, you have to have a fine intuition. You ought to be able to pick up a lot about a subject just by going into a room. If, for example, you visit an auto sales showroom with the idea you might buy a car, your imagination begins to work on everything that's involved.

Let me put it in another way: If you don't know a great deal about a particular milieu, but you do have an insight that feels as if it is inside, and intense and truly yours, that it is indeed your insight, and no one else's, then it is not that hard usually to pick up a lot of the collateral material. Because everything you are reading is illumined by this private perception you have, this personal hypothesis.

Let's say the hypothesis is that you can't be a good car salesman unless you're a complete rogue. You may start with this, but after you've met a few

car salesmen, this idea doesn't work any longer. All the same, so long as it did, you learned quite a bit about selling cars. There's no question that Updike, or even more, say, someone like Joyce Carol Oates, needs very little experience to extract a great deal out of what is imbibed.

Sometimes, however, you really have to do the research--if it's a very large subject, you can spend years on a book.

Ancient Evenigs, a novel about ancient Egypt in the Tenth and Nineteenth Dynasties, took me eleven years. The only thing I knew on starting was I had certain instincts about what death might be like, and these intimations had curious similarities to Egyptian notions. The ideas of the ancient Egyptians were certainly not the same as mine, but one element was near to identical. In death, you entered a second set of adventures which brought you to either a better place or a worse one. That was stimulating enough. I spent eleven years writing that book because I had to learn new things every step of the way. I don't recommend it. It's a hell of a way to spend eleven years. In fact, I was unfaithful to the book, because, believe me, if you become a serious novelist---dare I say it?---it's almost easier to cheat on your beloved than on your manuscript. The real question is who or which is more unforgiving, the book or the lady? It can well be the book. In

the case of Ancient Evenings, and I do speak of that work as a creature--she ended up being immensely forgiving. I deserted her for two years to write The Executioner's Song. And it's as if when I came back, the book said, "Hmmm, you look tired. Do your feet hurt? Here, I'll wash them." And there I was right back in the book. But often, if you desert something that you are working on, that's the end of it. It usually does not come back to you.

So in that sense, there's an enormous commitment to writing a novel. If you take on something that's larger than yourself, like ancient Egypt, you can end up seriously beached on long dry fields of research. If I have a tip to offer, I'd say that if you're going to do a book which demands a ton of research, then for God's sake get a subject about which other authors write well. Because part of the difficulty of doing my novel about ancient Egypt was that most Egyptologists had just the sort of style you would expect. You not only have to labor to absorb reams of fact, but you also have to remove the style of the factologists from your system.

That's the worst. The most difficult aspect of being a good novelist who takes on a heavy, dull, subject because of one exceptional element is that you are constantly cleaning out your system of these bad literary styles. That is analogous to the problem young writers face after they have grown up with

a lot of bad books and bad prose in newspapers. They, too, have to get rid of the second-rate styles that are in their system

Craft or Literary Research

We have to keep the holiness out of novel-writing. There are times when the need to write a novel is almost more important than the subject. Good novelists, should it come to being judged on a moral scale, are usually in the middle. Not too good, and preferably not too evil. For the latter sees more advantages to telling lies than truth. That's not a good practice for a novelist. Fiction is the only overriding lie you are permitted.

On the other hand, if your character is too decent, then you're estranged to a degree from humanity. So it helps if your character is sort of lousy, but there are contrasting and excellent elements as well. The breadth of the spectrum will work for you.

Sometimes you write a novel because it comes out of elements in yourself that are--no better word--deep. A subject appeals to you profoundly. So you set out on the novel. That is always an adventure. The height from a real ivory tower is awesome. But sometimes you get into an altogether different situation where you just damned well have to write a book for no better reason than that your economic problems are pressing.

Tough Guys Don't Dance fulfills that case. After I finished Ancient Evenings, I was exhausted. I also felt spoiled. That is, I felt, "I've worked very hard, and I am entitled to a vacation." So I didn't do any writing for about ten months. Unfortunately, my then-publisher, Little Brown, and I were parting company. (They weren't mad about authors who took eleven years on a massive tome like Ancient Evenings.) However, there was one more book owed them. And my feeling was, well, they won't want the book right away even if they have been paying me good money every month to write it and I haven't been doing the work. Reality didn't tap on the window for all those months. It sounds silly that a grown man could be so naïve, but, you know, one aspect of life that's fascinating is how supposedly sophisticated people can make crude errors.

So, on Month Ten, they said to me in effect: "Are you going to give us a novel or will you repay us the money we gave you all year? After all, you are leaving us." I thought, well, if I end up owing them that much money, I will never catch up with the IRS.

So the only thing was to present them with a novel. I couldn't possibly give them non-fiction because the research would take too long, no, I had to write something that would be quick and comfortable. First thing, therefore,

was to make a decision on whether it would be first person or third. First person was always more friendly in the beginning, more hospitable, and you can give a sense of the immediate almost at once. Decision made: it would be first person.

Next! Where can it take place? New York is too complicated to write about quickly. Yet it has to be a place I know well. All right, I'll do a book about Provincetown. At that time, in the early Eighties, I'd been going there off and on for forty years.

What should it be about? Well, I could take a page from An American Dream, a story of murder and suspense. But who would the narrator be? Another decision: let him be a writer. In first person, a writer is the single most cooperative character to deal with. Let him be between 35 and 40, frustrated, never published, bitter, quite bright but not as bright as myself. After all, I've got to be able to write this book in a hurry. Then, given these guidelines, I thought if only I had one pious bone in my body, I could now get down and pray. Because I was still in trouble. I had to produce the work in two months.

No further ado. I set out. It's one of the few times I've felt blessed as a writer. I knew there was a limit to how good the book could be, but the style

came through, and style is always half of a novel. You can write a very bad book but if the style is first-rate, then you've got something that will live, not forever but for a good long time. The arch example would be G.K. Chesterton's The Man Who was Thursday. It has an undeniably silly plot unless you invest a great deal into it. A worshipful critic can do a blatheringly wonderful thesis on the symbolic leaps and acrobatics of The Man Who was Thursday, but, actually, it's about as silly as a Jules Verne novel. Yet, the writing itself is fabulous. The style is extraordinary. The aperçus are marvelous. The Man Who Was Thursday absolutely proves my point. Style is half of a novel

And for some reason or other, the style came through in Tough Guys Don't Dance. It was probably, for the most part, nearly as good a style as I have mustered. The plot, however, was close to silly--it almost didn't matter. As you can see, however, keeping a novel quick and simple is a complex matter. Your mind is teeming with practical decisions.

Psych

What about doing personal injury to others when you write? Many young novelists tend to draw on their own lives or on their family, or the near world of friends. How, goes the question, do you manage that without making these near and dear people recognizable? Yes, how do you treat the familiar in such a way as not to incur the rage of those around you?

The answer is that it is next to impossible. You cannot write about people you are close to without hurting them or, to the contrary, doing a bad book because you allow so little to be wrong with them. They are all too nice. That is the first mark of absolutely amateur writing.

I've always stayed away from close material, never written about my parents or my sister, nor directly about women I've been married to. Those experiences are so basic that I encircle them with a favorite word--I characterize these experiences as crystals. They can be simple, or extraordinarily developed. But provided you don't use them directly and so exhaust them, you can shine the light of your imagination through their latticework in one direction or another and find altogether different scenarios. If you've got a son who's, let's say, a pretty tough kid, well, if you don't write about him directly, you can make the boy a bullfighter, or put him in Special Forces, even turn him into a bank robber. So long as you don't use the core

of the experience, you will find many possibilities. But if you do employ the core experience, if that's what you really want to put on paper, then at a given moment, you will have to face the fact that you could hurt people who are close to you.

I've used this example before: When a surgeon operates on a young girl, he isn't saying, "I'm going to make an incision on this young lady's stomach that is not only going to scar her but will affect her future sex life for the next 30 years." He just says, "Scalpel, nurse," and does it. The reason is that the surgeon is focused on his work, not the reverberations of the act.

As a novelist, one is engaged in something analogous. Novelists are oxymorons. They are sensitive and most insensitive. Full of heart and heartless. You have to be full of heart to feel what many people are feeling; you have to have a certain breadth, you might say, of perception. On the other hand, a novelist has to be relatively cold. If he or she starts thinking of all the damage they are going to do, they can't write the book--not if they're reasonably decent. Of course, a malicious person might kick up the traces, and feel young and happy again at being so mean, even feel a spark--dare I say Muriel Spark?--because they are going to hurt so many people.

The point is that one is facing a true problem in writing about people close to you and you have to end on one side or the other. Either you write a book that doesn't get near enough to what really interests you, or, if you try to go to the root with all you've got, there is no way you are not going to injure your near ones. Hardly anyone is ever happy with the portrait of themselves in a good novel.

Economics

I think that all of us, in order to have an interesting and effective inner life, come to depend on a number of fixed and changing hypotheses which we can describe as our private charts of reality. During the Cold War, for example, some saw the Soviet as evil and menacing, others as less of an evil empire than as it was presented. Naturally, these maps are no more than hypotheses. Yet our ongoing mental life depends on lively hypotheses. For example, I think one of the real motives of jealousy is that it always offers a powerful hypothesis. The moment a husband or wife does not trust his mate, life may become painful but it is also interesting. Because now they are figures in a detective story. Let's say the husband comes in after work and by the way he puts his hat and coat away, the wife can think, "yes, yes, he's feeling guilty." So she keeps the hypothesis: yes, he's cheating on me, and she keeps it going, so long as the evidence does not absolutely confute it. Then something happens--perhaps she finds out that the woman she was convinced he was having an affair with for the last two months, has teaching in China for half a year. All right, that ends the wife's hypothesis. She has to re-do the family charts, find a new mistress out there, or reassess her acumen.

Then there are the world-sized charts. Foreign affairs are going to hell in a handcart. A huge map. Things are collapsing, the West is in decline--

that's a very large hypothesis. Depending on the character of one's mind, one can have an immensely complicated worldview or a narrower and most restricted map where all you can say is, "I happen to know this region well. The rest is uncharted." It isn't that everyone has a complete filled-in vision of the world. We tend to develop those parts of the world we are interested in.

As a perfect example, nobody had Afghanistan doing anything much on his or her charts until September 11th. Now, all sorts of people are picking up all sorts of knowledge about Islam and the mountains and deserts of the East. It's become a lively work-in-progress.

To enlarge the notion, let me propose that we are all navigating through life. That is one reason why I think novels have this special quality other forms of communication don't have. It's very hard to think of a novelist with a good protagonist where the latter is not always moving between choices. And then you, in turn, as the writer, are having to monitor those choices. At the time when your characters become truly alive for you, which is one of the most spooky and agreeable aspects of serious novel-writing--when you find yourself having dialogues with your characters or at the least thinking about how they might react in certain situations that have nothing to do with your novel, then they do bear comparison to a dear but troublesome friend.

A specific example: At one point when I was writing Harlot's Ghost, I thought it would be interesting to send my protagonist-- who was a young man in the CIA (and very much under the tutelage of a very high CIA official called Harlot) --to Israel. Why? Because Harlot is jealous of the Gray Eminence of the CIA, James Jesus Angleton, and Harlot feels Angleton not only has too much of a hegemony in the CIA, but is on the inside track with the Mossad in Israel. So Harlot decides to send over his subaltern and have him work there. He can start to submarine Angleton through the subaltern. That appealed to me greatly. And I thought: do I dare to do it? Then I thought: No! The research will take a year. I'll probably have to go over to Israel. Being Jewish, and never having been in Israel before, that'll be another book, obviously, and I'll have to find out about the Mossad--the legendary Israeli intelligence organization. My chart is no help there. All I have is a big blank area that says, "truly major intelligence organization." I'm going to have to learn about them and it's going to be even more difficult than picking up on the CIA. I waited for about a week before I was ready to say to myself, "I'm going to wreck this book if I try to send Harry Hubbard to Israel. At best, I'll lose at least a year." So, instead I had him do something

less bold. But that is the way we make these decisions. Not only in novel-writing but in life.

You learn a lot about manipulation and hypocrisy. "Oh, I absolutely love your story!" lying through your teeth. You pick up a few notes on human nature. Whether you give enough for the time involved is another question. Indeed there is a kind of signature in many writers who come out of MFA programs. They tend to give you very good sentences and then move well on small subjects. Or on matters that are bizarre and intense. They also tend to be not terribly convincing. Because in a writing course, nothing makes you work with a teacher so much as a bold attempt that doesn't come off. No, a teacher is temperate develops to stay small. Still, some very good writers do come out of this process.

What the course can't satisfy is the problem of experience. Young people who write are not just moderately sensitive, they're over-sensitive. Experience is usually painful and difficult for them. Moreover, going out and choosing a new experience to write about is always false to a degree. I

Economics that material only becomes valuable when it is industrial. By

that I Writing courses are not always deleterious. I know I learned a good deal from them. For one thing, you certainly get used to how extensive is the spectrum of reaction to what you write. You also learn a lot about power

structures in your audience. Certain writers in a class form one little block, others ditto. You soon learn a lot about manipulation and hypocrisy--"Oh, I absolutely love your story!" lying through your teeth. You pick up a few notes on human nature. Whether you glean enough for the time invested is another question. Indeed there is a kind of signature to many writers who come out of MFA programs. They tend to give you very good sentences and then move well on small subjects. Or on matters that are bizarre and intense. They also tend to be not terribly ambitious. Because in a writing course, nothing makes you crash with a louder sound than a bold attempt that doesn't come off. So, a built-in tendency develops to stay small. Still, some very good writers do come out of this process.

What the course can't satisfy is the problem of experience. Young people who write are not just reasonably sensitive, they're over-sensitive. Experience is usually painful and difficult for them. Moreover, going out and choosing a new experience to write about is always false to a degree. I would argue that material only becomes valuable when it is existential. By that I simply mean an experience you do not control. Driving your car on a snowy road, there's a hairpin turn that you miscalculate, and suddenly you are in a terrible skid. For a fraction of a second, or for as much as a second

and a half, perhaps, you don't know if you're going to come out of it. You might be dead in the next instant. Or, wreck the car--a good deal goes through your mind at an enormous rate of speed--that's an existential moment. Another existential experience of a wholly different character, ongoing, heavy, full of dread, common to many marriages, is where a woman is miserable with her husband, but adores her child and hates the thought of divorce. Anna Karenina, for example.

In any event, there is no answer to the problem of how a young writer can pick up experience. If you search for it, but have your hand on a guard-rail--in other words, you are able to quit the experience if it gets too hot for you--then this controlled adventure can be useful and good conceivably for a magazine piece, but it's not necessarily there for bringing you to that deeper level of writing all young scriveners aspire to.

Economics

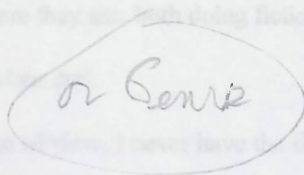
Part of the art of being a writer is to play that very delicate game of obtaining experience without falsifying it by the act of observation. Generally

Link with
"The Notebook"
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speaking, it's easier to experience such knowledge by being part of an event that is much larger than yourself. Think of 9/11. There must be 500 young writers in New York who had an hour or two, or a day of experience that was incomparable--nothing remotely like that had ever happened before in their lives. And it's not unlikely that extraordinary work will yet come out of it. Hopefully, not all about 9/11. A few may keep it as a crystal. If you never write about 9/11, but were in the vicinity that day, you could conceivably describe a battle in a medieval war and provide a real sense of such a lost event. You could do a horror tale. Or write about the sudden death of a beloved. All kinds of good writing can derive ultimately from 9/11. What won't always work is writing about it directly. That kind of good writing can be exhausted too quickly. And the temptation to go at it head-on, was, of course, immense inasmuch as the event was traumatic to so many. A large part of writing, alas, is an eliminatory process. The worst thing that can be said about literary work is that it can stoop all too easily to serve as therapy. To that degree, it tends not to be good, because literature and therapy are intimately opposed. The noblest objective of writing is, ideally, that you bring wealth to others. Wealth of experience, wealth of observation, wealth of perception, the riches of a philosophical attitude that's to a degree

new, insights into psychology the reader hasn't had before--all these are on the noble side of writing, the selfless side. On the other hand, there is also the extraordinary interplay of ego and vanity and need, the desire, finally, to advance oneself as a writer. People don't become authors for the sole reason that they want to benefit humanity. They're in the same position as priests. Part of them wants to be good to other humans, and the other part wants, one way or the other, to have some sort of rich, interesting life. Which is often hugely at odds with the first notion. Generosity versus acquisition, compassion at war with greed. Not surprising then, if such tension pushes one toward psychic evacuation, reduction of stress, therapy through attempts at literature.

Craft or Philosophy



I've found that readers and reviewers and critics have a problem when an author mixes real characters with fictional characters. I've never been bothered unduly by that because as far as I'm concerned, it's all fiction. I can't conceive of a history that's not. Let's say for the sake of argument that there

are 1000 large and small details necessary to capture a given moment in time--Napoleon's return from Elba, the death of Robespierre, or John F. Kennedy on the night before he was assassinated--whatever is chosen, there are a large number of facts. The historian has to decide which are most relevant. He can't use them all, and, more important, can't get them all. All the same, let's say he amasses a thousand facts.

Should the novelist come in, also ready to write about Kennedy's last night, he or she is not nearly as good, doubtless, at research, and so comes up with only 40 or 50 details that seem considers vital. What I would argue is that the historian and the novelist are both writing fiction. The difference is that the historian uses more facts, although they are never numerous enough to enclose the reality. Moreover, the historian usually writes in a style that's more pedestrian. There they are, both doing fiction, one is sometimes sprightly, the other, often dull.

Given this point of view, I never have the illusion when I put a real character next to a false character in any book of mine, that I know more about the real character because he was or is alive. I do hope, however, to get to know the real character better before I'm done, almost as well as I know my fictional characters.

Now, you can't put every historic figure into a novel, but you can do most of them. The point to remember is that every good novel is making an attack on the nature of reality. I've always been drawn more toward realism than fantasy because it seems to me realism is endlessly interesting and finally indeterminable. Realism is a species of fantasy that's much more integrated and hard-core than fantasy itself. We must never forget that the nature of what is real is arguable. Endlessly arguable.

Philosophy

The 20th century artist who had the most influence on me was probably Picasso. He kept changing the nature of his attack on reality. It's as if he felt there is a reality out there but it's elusive. It is not a hard object like a piece of sculpture, but a creature who keeps changing its shape. Possibly it is a dangerous reality. And if I, Picasso, have been trying to reach this creature

over several years by means of a particular aesthetic style and this is as far as I have gotten, then I am going to try another style altogether. And off Picasso went into a different mode of attack on reality. It's as if you have to go up the north face of the mountain, come back and do the south face, the southwest face, so forth.

Psych?

I confess that I still perceive, somewhat wistfully, a difference in the genders. I think there are certain topics where it helps if men are not only profoundly gay but most feminine in their nature. Proust is the definitive example of that. To the converse, women certainly have every right to create men at war and conceivably succeed, but I think it has to be recognized that it's harder for them. Why? Because war is essentially a male invention. There's very little evidence that women ever showed the same warlike

inventiveness and capacity and determination and hellishness that men have at war. However, if we are to ask whether men and women can write equally about bravery, I would be affirmative. What is bravery, after all? Take a woman who is immensely timid--let's say she was terrorized through her childhood--and ends up an immensely timid woman. When she's an old lady and every bone in her body is aching, it may be an act of courage for her to cross a busy street. In other words she doesn't really feel she can do it in time with the lights, yet she feels she has to do it for her own honor, if you will, and she does it. That may be more brave, given the relative situation of the woman, than the brave act of a soldier who's been trained to be brave, who is bonded to the soldiers he is with, who considers that there's no disgrace in life worse than not being up to the occasion. Where you get to real bravery in soldiers is when they've worked all the way through their own code to that point where they feel, yes, I may lose--I may lose my heart, my dignity, my honor, I'm scared beyond measure, scared shitless. If, at this point, they still proceed to push themselves to continue to be brave where they could easily break down, then this existential situation underlines the likelihood that their behavior is noble.

So I would say in a certain sense, we all know what constitutes brave action. A woman who keeps her crystals intact, so to speak, can write about brave soldiers, brave male and brave female soldiers, even though she's not the least bit brave at that level. Of course, she has to have an immense talent. I've often thought that Joyce Carol Oates, who is not necessarily one of my favorite writers but nonetheless is a very talented woman, will often, on the basis of a tiny bit of experience, write a 600 page novel. I think she's an arch example of someone who does it all through talent. Very often her judgments seem unsound, but she will try, she tries. I'd say she's a noble writer in that sense because she's pushing far beyond anything that's comfortable. She's willing to dare terrible humiliation.

Economics?

You never need trust what a novelist declares is literary value because we all are our own publicity agents. It's the worst thing about us. Our theories of the novel invariably fortify our own positions. Since I tend to try for things that are a little beyond my reach, naturally that's my idea of value. Although I respect their obvious talents which are certainly large, and, on

occasion, close to formidable, there's a part of me that secretly sneers at Roth and at Updike because, finally, what they do is comfortable. It is not usually the hardest thing they could aspire to.

Now, there's any number of people who would say: That's what a novel should be. It should be warm and comfortable. It should enrich our understanding of life as we know and sense it already. We get a lot out of reading a book that tells us more about people we already know something about—there, sir, is the true value of a novel. Not this existential business of going off on large, often wild, attempts to understand people whose endeavors you really can't know that much about.

And it is true that you can set the bar much too high, and then never clear it. On the other hand, our period is dangerous, much more dangerous than the times in the great era of the novel in the nineteenth century. We are closer to destroying ourselves as a species, and all the quintessential Guardsmen of the past, the priests and kings, the presidents and generals and bankers, press editors and all too many of the sports heroes have forfeited our trust. The function of the novelist now more than ever is to offer those explanations of human conduct that the others do not find. Since the

Guardsmen here cited have failed, it could be that the novelists have to dig in a little closer to the plate.

Note to ML:

Maybe there should be Craft I, Craft II, Economics I, Economics II, etc.

yes, good idea

morning with a long-overdue journal go to library with your unconscious
withdrawn.

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Economics

I've found one rule over the years--the only one I give every writing
class. I've probably given this piece of advice twenty times-- it's the only
maxim that works for everyone, I believe. It is that if you tell yourself you
are going to write tomorrow, you are by that act also telling your
unconscious: Prepare the material! I will be there to pick it up from you
tomorrow, and count on me: I will write it. The point is that you have to
establish trustworthy relations with your unconscious. If you wake up in the

morning with a hangover and cannot go to literary work, your unconscious withdraws.

It is quite likely our unconscious is never all that much in love with us. The battle between the ego and the unconscious is, I think, a real war. In many people it's equal to an unhappy marriage, and marriages depend, after all, upon trust. Unhappy marriages depend immensely on what little mutual trust there is. So, I repeat: You have to establish decent relations with your unconscious, and you might as well see this procedure as complex, possibly as complicated as any tricky reality with someone outside your skin. The unconscious presence within may have as many interests, aspects, principalities, chasms, terrors, underworlds, other-worlds, and ambitions as yourself. Your unconscious may even have ambitions that are not your own--for practical purposes, it may be worth thinking of it as a separate creature. If you do look upon it as such, as a curious and semi-alienated presence with whom you have to maintain decent relations---if you look upon yourself as a sort of general (of the old, aristocratic and careless school) and think of the unconscious as your often unruly body of troops, then obviously, you don't dare keep those troops out in the rain needlessly---certainly not at the

commencement of a serious campaign. On the contrary, you make a pact: "Work for me, fight for me, and I will honor you."

The rule, therefore, is that if you say to yourself you are going to write tomorrow, then it doesn't matter how badly you're hung over or how promising is a sudden invitation. You go in dutifully, slavishly, and you work. This injunction is anti-romantic in spirit. But if you subject yourself to just such dire regularity, then after a period of time, it might take weeks, or more, but the unconscious, nursing its disappointments, begins to trust you.

This is an impost on young writers who are not only ambitious but wild enough to feel that their wildness is part of their talent. They hate to submit to the heavy hand, that awful, severe, unbending rule of moderation, and responsibility, the order that you have to show up.

On the other hand, you can sometimes say to yourself, "I'm not going to work tomorrow," and the unconscious may even by now be close enough in accord not to produce perishable material. That is also important because in the course of going out and having the decent day and night you're entitled to, you don't keep having thoughts about the book you're working on. At that point, you've arrived at one of the disciplines of a real writer. You have avoided the unpleasant condition of having lively thoughts about a work-in-

progress when there is no piece of paper under your hand and no pen or pencil in your fingers. (Those who use a laptop computer will probably scoff at this, but then their cell phone will probably ring when they are writing on what was supposed to be a good day off.)

Philosophy or Psychology

If you believe in fiction, if you believe in the power of the novelist as I do, then all subjects are possible. In any event, however, certain avenues present more obstructions than others. It would be harder, as an example, for a male novelist to learn about the small irritations of a woman's day, than to imagine what her sex would be like. After all, one of the novelistic elements of sex is the feeling of nearness to the Other. It's one of the compelling reasons for sex precisely because such sentiments live almost entirely outside

the sacraments. For example, why do certain people who are very pious nonetheless feel driven to break their own deepest sexual prohibitions? I think it's because the experience of meeting the Other is so incredible. Which is why I say it's easier--if you're going to write about someone of the opposite gender--to treat them sexually, to understand them from that point of view, rather than attempt to get into the intimate nitty-gritty of woman's daily life. That could prove as difficult as trying to interpret ancient Egypt if you don't have a good feeling for it.

Colleagues

Very often in a novel one arrives at a half-perception about the needs of one's prose. That half-perception can be absolutely brilliant. Great writers have come out of half-perceptions. I've always felt that Hemingway and Faulkner who, in my mind, are the two greatest American writers of the 20th century, each possessed half of a whole. Hemingway simply could not write a long, powerful, architecturally structured sentence and get away with it. He could do short sentences, and long ones connected by conjunctions, and he did extraordinary things with that limitation. Faulkner, in turn, was



incapable of writing about anything simply. In that sense, they each had a half-life in their attack upon reality. They did it, you might say, with one arm rather than two—but what an arm! What an extraordinary arm.

Economics

One rule of corporate life. If you're ever in a situation where you're dealing with a publishing house, or—even more true with a movie company—don't worry about the Number One man. Do your best to have the Number Two man or woman approve of what you're doing. Because if Number One likes what you give him and Number Two doesn't, the Number One man will almost never give a go-ahead. It's to the advantage of the Number One man to stay in accord with Two.

Consider it as a logical proposition. If One insists on doing your project, and the book or movie that comes out doesn't do well, then Number Two now has a real edge, conceivably enough—if the stakes were high—to

someday take over One's job. On the other hand, if the One was right in going ahead with you and your submission does well, then Number Two will never forgive Number One for exhibiting more acumen and more of a nose for profit than himself.

On the other hand, if One turns to Two and says, "OK, we'll do it your way, we won't take it on," and your script or film doesn't do well, then Two can feel genial enough to say, "I'm working for a pretty good guy; he pays attention to me, he respects me. That is because he knows I'm usually right." Of course, if they don't do it, and someone else picks it up and does well, Number Two is left at a whole disadvantage.

Ergo, the rule suggests: Get to the Number Two man and hope he likes your work.

On the other hand, if you've written your best, forget about these practicalities. It's taken me fifty years to learn this sort of thing. In that sense, it's not worth learning. After all, I still have to find out how to get to the Number Two man. Chapter two!