

WRITERS AND THEIR CHARACTERS

Some invitations you don't regret. This is one. The previous offer too tempting to decline came from a Moroccan school that asked me to say a little speech at last June's graduation. My son was teaching there, at the American School of Tangier, and cynics might remark with raised eyebrows that my invitation came as a product of nepotism. I hope cynics, for once, were right. I'd be gratified to imagine that my son pulled strings to get me invited across an ocean to his school to talk for fifteen minutes. If he did, he didn't pull very hard, because there was no payday — what we artists have learned to term "a modest honorarium" — attached to my performance. Moreover, news that shriveled my spirit, there would be — as ever at such ceremonies — a prize-giving.

I had sat through high school Prize Days and these were not my happiest memories. Not that I haven't received my due portion of superlatives: if my school yearbook voted my best friend "Smartest," classmates voted me "Thinks He Is." My school headmaster, searching for a perfect absolute to apply to my ambitious self, dubbed me The Weak Link in an Otherwise Strong Choate Chain. Later I cleaned up my act, learned to play the game. That is, to be honored and be-ribboned at Prize Day, I learned to sell out; this was bravura selling-out. I was at boarding school for a year in England. Because my fellow students were conspicuously better-educated than I was, smoother writers, quicker at Latin and whatnot, more deft at rugby and cricket, I set my cap on the one school prize that just might have my name on it. To win the Brian Tunstall Imperial Studies Prize an essay on a set subject was required; that year the subject was The American Rebellion of 1776: Why and How. This was not a magnet to my fellow students; I saw hope here. All I had to do was sell out

my country, make snide references to the colony's pathetic "peasant citizenry," its bumpkin stubbornness, the short-sightedness that led by awful degrees to a nation of oafish automobilists so ignorant that they drive on the wrong side of the road. I stand before you the recipient of Eastbourne College's Brian Tunstall Imperial Studies Prize in the year 1956, an award that consisted of the gift of a book, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, just the thing for a fan of empire and an apprentice traitor.

I've come to dread the spring, all those announcements of The Best This, Most Distinguished That. It doesn't help that these awards are dealt out during Academy Award season, not to mention the NCAA basketball playoffs. Who lost, who called the time-out that wasn't, who sits sweating it out under the lights at Dorothy Chandler Pavilion wearing a ridiculous dress or dinner jacket, trying to paint a brave smile on her perfect face, his perfect face, clapping like a trained seal when some paltry upstart wins Best Supporting Actress even though the loser *knows* she's a better actress because she's doing such a perfect job of playing the part of a smiling good sport.

Something evil kicks in at Prize Days. An urge to give the teacher's pet a noogie in the playground. So imagine my pleasure at The American School of Tangier when I saw that serious prizes are bestowed only on students in pre-kindergarten through third grade: Omar Kebdani was given a tricycle for being "a cheerful boy who has contributed to a happy attitude" in pre-kindergarten. For her "sweet nature" in kindergarten Zarah Scullion got a bicycle with training wheels. For her "charming personality" in second grade, a bicycle without training wheels was given to Ines Doval.

When Robert Kennedy was alive, that most competitive man and his family hosted an annual pet show. Only blue ribbons were bestowed. Handsomest Goldfish With a Bitten Dorsal; Most Serene Fifteen Year Old Irish Setter; Best Behaved Turtle, Slowest Turtle, Best-Hidden Turtle. Every entrant went home a winner and this was as it should have been. *Every* writer who shows up for the contest and stays till the end deserves a blue ribbon. I mean this. What writers do is hard, deserves to be honored.

I could say it doesn't count who wins or loses, that it matters only how we play the game. That is, I could be a homiletic fool. Let me spare you. The American practice of ranking is too durable to surrender to mere cliché. The myth of eternal progress dies hard here,

and its calculus leads inexorably to a faith in Número Uno. I recall watching an extraordinary NBA championship game between the Lakers and my beloved Celtics, Bird contending with Magic. It was an inspired contest and the playing of it brought awed goofy grins to the opposing players even after the game ended. Of course there was a winner and a loser (never mind which was which), but believe it or not the players at first didn't seem to notice that there had been a final result to their play, until the chant cascaded down from the bleachers: "We're Number One!" Victorious pitlings waved those grotesque foam rubber idiot fingers at defeated pitlings: "We're Number One!"

This is the mentality, the writer as prize fighter, Hemingway imagining himself in the ring against Tolstoy, Mailer versus Hem, that gives score-keeping a bad name. It elevates outcome over process, career over calling, publication over writing. It's as simplistic as a thumb up or thumb down, Siskel & Eberly, two dumb thumbs turned either which way. It encourages a coarse taxonomy—this champeen is one of the five best epic poets writing since the Korean War, that one the best novelist ever to win the Brian Tunstall Imperial Studies Prize in 1956.

The habit of ranking is epidemic in our country. Its most vulgar expression is ten-best lists, who's on the short list, who's been cut. Discrimination can be delicate or gross, the practice of learning to select and exclude clothes, college applicants, clubmates, friends, lovers. Of course, not all discrimination is unwholesome. For a writer exclusion and selection exhibit themselves word upon word: this word is better than that word but here—behold!—the last *best* word. And for a writer there's an even more complicated aspect to discrimination; I speak of the mysterious program by which we are chosen by our passions, our obsessions, that series of choices that provokes us to tell this story rather than that story.

But how do any of us license ourselves to tell any story at all, and why should anyone listen, let alone turn a thumb up, tack a blue ribbon to the title page? Writers, when they finally find their voices, are shrewdly guarded, uncomfortable with anyone who knew them back when, back before they could sing, back when they could merely yawp and bark and whine. Juvenilia ain't a pretty sight or for sure a pretty sound. In fact, the phenomenon of youthful stylistic gracelessness is so inevitable a fact of every writer's experience that many ripe writers recollect their early careers with shame, others

with amusement, all with a sense of disconnection from that pre-historic self. No writer who owned copy paper and a file cabinet can pretend to be ignorant of the awkward truth of his or her beginnings, of the early self's bumptious posturing, misdirected attention, unfelt passion and unearned contempt.

And because I can read now what I wrote then, I know that the wickedest and stupidest mischief any teacher of writing can commit against a student of writing is to tell that student — on *any* provocation or botched attempt — that that student is without hope, that that student should shut up.

I suspect that like most fiction writers in this room I began composing stories on the page after I had given myself a creative writing workshop by telling lies to pals in the school cafeteria and to strangers on trains. For reasons both sound and meretricious the life I was living during adolescence was insufficient to my ignoble ambitions and to my nobler dreams. I made up a new life — new lives — for myself. Because I soon became lonely in that meagerly populated alternate world, inhabited only by people who shared my passionate preoccupation with me, time came when I peopled it with men and women — boys and girls, then — who had their own imperatives, who chafed against their own deficient destinies. I tried, that is, to make characters. Looking back now at those makings and unmakings, I flinch. I blush. To play God is to give oneself a license; I chose back then to remain ignorant of the responsibility that comes with liberty. I mean that the world I invented for others was often reflexively mean; my people too often were mean also, outlandishly costumed, moronic, goitered, foolish, errant, too fat, too skinny, too bald-headed, too near-sighted, too horny, too easy to laugh at.

Why, I wonder now? The simple answer is that such characters demand less art, less complication, in the making. In her explanation of her methods, that virtuoso of the grotesque Flannery O'Connor justifies her exaggeration of her characters by observing that "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures." Of course O'Connor was attempting to imitate for the disbelieving or uncertain reader the movements of faith, what she took to be the experience of grace, the human-scaled adventure of epiphany. I, by contrast, was playing for a laugh, printing portraits on high-contrast paper so they'd be easy to see at a quick glance, being as easy on myself as I was hard on my characters.

It's tempting now to disavow what I made in my apprentice years as a novelist. I say "apprentice years as a novelist" so casually: I'm referring offhand to eight years of writing fiction, laboring daily on three novels now out of print. I'm happy enough to have them out of print, but I'm also mindful that auto-Schadenfreude, a smirking derision for one's earlier self, has become a besetting vice of middle-aged writers. An awful shrewdness motivates this pervasive disloyalty to our earlier selves. In a recent story, "Smorgasbord," my dear brother Tobias causes his narrator, looking back on the foolish energy and treachery and deforming outcome of adolescent love, to meditate:

We're supposed to smile at the passions of the young, and at what we recall of our own passions, as if they were no more than a series of sweet frauds we had fooled ourselves with and then wised up to. Not only the passion of boys and girls for each other but the others, too—passion for justice, for doing right, for turning the world around—all these come in their time under our wintry smiles. But there was nothing foolish about what we felt. Nothing merely young.

Toby is contemplating youthful romance, and I am contemplating youthful distemper, but I hope I'm right in ascribing both kinds of expression to passion. It is wrong to repudiate wholesale those earlier turmoils of the spirit. Stanley Kunitz has offered an opinion, following the experience of reviewing his life's work for a collection of poems, that writers don't evolve, they change. Not *merely* change, of course: style, after all is character, and character style, so that changes in a writer's preoccupations, a writer's attitude toward his created characters, have the deepest consequence. But it is true that to get to here, we leave there; for every piece of new ground we take, we abandon a position. To achieve the serenity I wish for my characters I have neglected perturbation, gaining compassion I have defused ferocity. And worst fear of all, I have taken to looking over my shoulder at my readers and critics. Once I wanted to make noise. This expressed itself as foolishly as farting in chapel or as strenuously as shouting in outrage. Now, I fear, I've learned to mind my manners. Wouldn't it be awful to discover, looking in the mirror at my bald head and white beard, after all this I've learned to be . . . what? A good boy? The Strong Link in an Otherwise Weak Choate Chain?

Critics like to prattle about writers' gifts and promise. Promise is a sham; promise implies a debt, and no writer owes anyone anything, unless that writer chooses to owe himself or herself a shot at finding a voice. Gift is a fantasy; late at night or (better) at the cusp of dawn, with Coltrane or Monk or Miles sneaking sweetly out of the speakers, the prose writers who are my friends will confess that gift is an illusion, a magic trick learned by practice. None of us was born with teeth and beard and word processor. I believe that the only gift any writer can hope to hold is the gift of character, and that good character — generosity and engagement — is not a pre-existent quality that a good person brings to his or her work, by blind genetic luck. I believe that good character is created by good work. And good work in its turn is generous work. I'm not referring to "moral fiction," whatever John Gardner may have meant by that honorific. I mean a world populated by human beings who are not just one thing, not just another. I'm speaking of characters unbounded by a writer's narrow plan for them and use of them. Characters who can be blue on Monday morning and full of song that night. Characters who can do some monstrous deed — shoot a bank teller, make love to a younger sister maybe even feeling love for her — and then perform a kindness, dry the dishes, comfort a friend.

If writing is done a word at a time, so it is read a word at a time, and its value — if it has any — comes from just this, a consecutive and manifest record of choices made, *in the moment*, now, a process rather than an outcome. Those choices make then a personal history of choices, a big mosaic made of tiny pieces, the letters of the alphabet, marks of punctuation as tiny as periods. Writing has nothing to do with what is going to happen — a movie sale, a National Book Award; it has everything to do with what is happening. Choosing words laboriously one at a time — with false starts and every imaginable mistake and then, in the face of awful discouragements, repairing with grunt labor what is broken or deformed — answering this calling one learns, *must* understand, that the failure of a word, sentence, story, novel is not prophetic. From all the opportunities to get it wrong, even to do wrong on the page, one learns, glacially, that it *is* possible to get there from here. This, together with the odd truth that for a writer bad luck (an unhappy childhood, say) can be translated into the good luck of a good story, is as close as I have

come to experiencing faith in alchemy, in a perpetual motion machine, in a free lunch.

I don't want to deform the integrity of these experiences by casual sermonizing. It is daunting for any writer of good will to know how to express his or her better angels. Take stamina, putatively the most accessible aspect of a writer's good character. The third and last of those early novels to which I referred above is *Inklings*, begun in 1971 under the pressure of desperation. Following the publication of my first novel, *Bad Debts*, which like most first novels came fast and happily, which like many first novels was greeted warmly by reviewers, probably from the same critical reflex that provokes an audience of parents to give a standing ovation to an elementary school performance of *Macbeth*, I had caught a bad case of *I-wrote-a-book disease*. I finished a second novel, quit a job at Princeton, quit a job at *Newsweek*, cashed out a small pension, took my wife and young sons to Brittany. The idea was simple: we would live off the advance I got for my second novel, *The Sightseer*. That there was to be such an advance was, I was certain, a done deal. The then editor of one of America's more prestigious publishing companies had told me after reading my first novel that he would publish anything I gave him. I gave him, weeks before we left for France and after I had quit my day jobs, *The Sightseer*. Mr. Gottlieb's response: "I meant I'd publish anything but this."

It was time to regroup. I now had a drug-resistant case of *I've-written-a-rejected-book disease*, also known as second novel disease, only known cure—start a third. So I did, and thereupon embarked on a five year serial remedy of submission (what a word!) and revision (what a concept!). I lifted a heavy soul to the writing loft those years, would not abandon my two darlings, saw them through thin and thin. Got them, by Jove, *published* (in such measly numbers that unsigned copies of *The Sightseer* and *Inklings* are more valuable, rarer too, than the inscribed books.) My regret here is not owing, I hope and believe, to meager sales. I worked on *Inklings* all the way up to 1976, long after I'd ceased to be caught in its net, long after I'd ceased really to care about it. I understood this to be good character, forbearance, tenacity, grit, fidelity. Today I think this was a mistake, or it wasn't; I learned from it; *Inklings* was a whole graduate school in pain and error. Finally, after eight years, now vee may perhaps to begin? Back then this is what I believed: I was a writer; I had to write, right? It was promised; I was promised.

In the end writing is a contest. The conflict is against one's lesser self. One sovereign expression of this competition is the writer's attitude toward his or her characters. I would like to believe that everything we need to know about a writer's character—stamina, good faith, curiosity, warmth, unsolemn seriousness, compassion—is expressed through that crucial relationship between the writer and the writer's invented creatures. Stanley Elkin has written that writing is a revenge against bullies. It levels the playing field for geeks, unlocks the gate for outsiders, evens the odds. To create characters for whom a writer feels indifference or contempt is to be a bully oneself.

Why would anyone want to take the trouble to conjure up a fish, equip the creature with fins and gills, color the scales pretty, invent for this fish a sea to swim in but limit that sea to a littoral bound by a barrel, and all this ado of creation merely to shoot the damned fish? Writers do it all the time, inseminate and give birth to characters merely to mock them, box their ears, bring them low. But why?

Maybe from a sourness born of self-pity. So much is stacked against the writer: neglect, solipsism, a miserable hourly wage, envy, despair. Where writers gather there they share the oral history, the low comedy of tribal lore: the humiliations of barding around, the megalomania of fellow writers, the logrolling of blurblogists, the perfidy of editors, the signed copy of one's book discovered by the writer for sale at the Strand the day after it has been given as a gift. One hears of the book printed by Doubleday and sent by a miracle of automation directly to the shredder, without taking a detour to warehouse and bookstore. It's enough to make you weep, or turn you into a cynic, or make you hard on your characters.

There are so many ways to make a wrong narrative turn: using close third person voice a writer can step too hard on a character's neck, shout him, drown out his voice with your own. In first person a writer can miscalculate proportion, miscalibrate a reader's willingness to sympathize with a narrator's predicament. In deference to the ugly imperatives of self-interest, with mad fidelity to narrative self-focus, a writer can decide to let his character complain aloud of toothache while she's bedside in a cancer ward. Such recklessness can be foolhardy, grotesque. Yet without the courage to pursue a character's character down the dark alleys where *will* lead, the writer surrenders to feeble and unfelt piety, as though Iago

were to say, Gee, I'm sorry, as though Richard III were to cry, My kingdom! Take it, you deserve it.

Norman Mailer, in a *Paris Review* interview, was asked "what can ruin a first-rate writer?" His reply was not inclusive, but it spelunked the major caves: "Booze, pot, too much sex, too much failure in one's private life, too much attrition, too much recognition, too little recognition, frustration. Nearly everything in the scheme of things works to dull a first-rate talent. But the worst probably is cowardice—as one gets older, one becomes aware of one's cowardice, the desire to be bold which once was a joy gets heavy with caution and duty. And finally there's apathy."

Mailer's right. Writing *is* difficult. Not harder than anything; not harder than stripping asbestos or digging post-holes in the rain or jack-hammering asphalt under a hot sun or nursing the sick. Not hard like dancing topless or selling religion door-to-door. Writing is more like playing acoustic guitar on the makeshift stage of a concrete-block roadhouse in competition with a really quite challenging pinball machine; let's agree the work is difficult. Dark and lonely, and nobody has to do it.

If ever you need a definition of a discretionary use of time, fiction writing and reading will fill the bill. If one Sunday the newspapers had no new novel to review, eyebrows might be raised. The next Sunday, same empty story, same blank pages, no new novels, an atmosphere of anxiety. Sunday after that, think pieces: Whither Literature? It's a nice fantasy, like imagining how dearly we'll be missed after we die. Writers are one-by-oners, one-at-a-timers, bespoke tailors. We don't write to fill a quota of books, and so we know very well, hurtfully well, how well the world can get by without this one particular thing we are each, in mad solitude, trying to tailor-make. *Non serviam* cuts both ways. *So what?* is a question I have asked and asked and asked my work. And this too is why my cottage industry is difficult. Unrequited love's a stone terror. It was so in 4th Grade, it is so on publication day. There's the book, an ad in the Personals. *Comely, comic, complex, comprehensible*. Writer looking for reader, long-term relationship wanted. Writing's a preposterous enterprise, crazy lonely and then crazy public. Squirreled away squirrely at your damned desk however many years, and then naked in the crosshairs of a reader or a reviewer's spectacles, if you're lucky. It's such a tricky business, this blind date, a writer and reader.

So let's agree writing isn't easy. Life isn't easy. And we shouldn't make what is difficult for all of us more difficult for our own newborn, for our characters let's say. Diminishing them, robbing them of language, failing to feel with their senses, turning our backs on them. I believe that a creative life, a life of which it might be possible to be proud, begins with the simple act of meaning one's characters well, of giving them their best shot at life, language, and the pursuit of energy.

Writers are first-class complainers, wonderful whiners, bravura bellyachers and—great grief!—great griever. I don't believe of course that woe is exclusively us, that sorrow, rue, and ire are peculiar to writers, that some genetic glitch has soured our temperaments, exacerbated our exquisite sense of injury. It isn't writers' essential natures that so reflexively sour our pussies; it's our amplifying profession, the broadcast of our gloom, its publication.

So what's our gripe? That we're inadequately loved, of course, by which writers at their pettiest mean inappreciatively reviewed, carelessly read, insufficiently read. In fact, it's an extraordinary union, the collision between a writer and a reader. All that competing noise out there, all that sound and fury, all those words. And a writer, a perfect stranger—oh, a most imperfect stranger!—cries out to a fellow stranger, "Stop what you're doing. Fish some other morning, plant bulbs next weekend. Read me. Shut up and pay close attention, now, hear me out—hear only me."

And it happens. The preposterous claim on your undivided attention we writers pray you'll honor—some of you, sometimes, honor it. Maybe not a Rose Bowl full, but some of you, enough to make a quorum, put together a nice party.

This is a nice party, a gathering of the tribes. So in honor of the occasion and for all of you writers out there at the beginning or in the middle of things, of this life we share—take it from me: you take the prize.