

DO YOU WRITE WITH A PEN?

John Dufresne

I want to speak to those of you who may want to write but don't write, or who write a little and dream of writing more, and to those of you don't ever want to write, don't ever want to stare into the abyss of the blank page (though, who knows, it might happen) but who do enjoy a good story well enough to want to know how one happens and who are interested in knowing what it is exactly that fiction writers do and why they bother doing it. I'm here to answer your questions, and for the sake of expediency, I've written the questions for you.

Question 1: Do you write with a pen or on the computer?

This strikes me as an important and incisive question though I've heard it disparaged by plenty of writers over the years as being naive, jejune, (well, all right, no one ever said jejune, but how often do you get to use that word?) and irrelevant. But I believe that all of the important questions are naive and impertinent. This is just the sort of innocent question that I used to ask visiting writers at my school (or more often wished to ask them because I was shy and crippled with doubt and anxiety) when I was a reader but not a writer. There were no writers in my neighborhood, in my world, after all, so how else was I supposed to learn? I was trying to imagine how writers did what they did. If I could visualize the process taking place, I thought, then maybe I could do it myself.

Some of us write with pens, some with pencils. (You see how I'm speaking for all of us.) Others of us compose on computers. Some of us still crank out stories on a typewriter. (Gary Gildner, for one, author of the marvelous story collection *Somewhere Geese Are Flying*, types away on his Smith-Corona portable holed up in his cabin in Idaho. John Irving and Cormac McCarthy are two more who famously still type their novels, as opposed to keyboarding them.) When I learned from movies that writers typed their stories, while smoking pipes typically, I was crestfallen. I thought I could never be a writer in that case because I couldn't type, and a briar pipe? Well, that was too glaring an affectation to be even considered. (A little knowledge is such a dangerous thing.) Meanwhile, in Japan, the young these days are punching out their novels on cell phones. Of 2007's ten best-selling Japanese novels, five were originally cell phone novels or keitai. The serialized chapters usually consist of about seventy to two hundred words each. Twenty-one-year-old Rin (cell phone novelists favor one name) saw her cell phone novel, *If You*, sell 400,000 copies in hardcover. In 2009, Bunny's three-volume novel *Wolf Boy x Natural Girl* grossed \$610,000 in hardcover. Bunny was fifteen. Most cell-phone novelists are teenaged girls. So, yes, you can write a novel with your thumbs. The first cell phone novel, Yoshi's *Deep Love*, about subsidized dating, was made into a television series, a manga, and a movie. (This from the land that gave literature its first novel, Lady Murasaki's *The Tale of the Genji*.) Microlit has yet to take off in the US, but we have seen at least one Twitter novel, *The Falcon Can Hear the Falconer*, by Brandon J. Mendelson. For those of you interested in pursuing smart phone lit, just remember you won't make any money, if that is your aim, until the work is in print.

I happen to write with a fountain pen because I like going slow on a white (never yellow), lined 8 by 11 planning tablet with a notetaking column on the left. (I have sixteen fountain pens in a Churchill Downs commemorative mug beside my desk, but I tend to use the navy blue Pelikan Future P55 or the disposable Varsity fountain pens in blue, black, and purple.) I write many drafts longhand. I change sentences, words, and phrases as I write, often recopying the entire annotated draft from the first line to the point at which the corrections get so messy and confusing that I have to stop and make a fresh copy. In this way I get to feel the rhythm of the prose, hear the tone of the narrative voice. As a result, the first lines of my stories and chapters are rewritten more than the last lines. Each draft, each rewritten page, is neater and more competent than the previous. I find that I even sabotage myself by deliberately misspelling a word, so I'll have to rewrite the page again. I know that each time I undermine my tendency to be lazy in this way, the story improves. (Yes, this is the most inefficient writing method on earth, and I need to get less anal about it all because I have a lot of stories I want to write, and have decidedly less time to write them in. I should have taken typing in high school. I took four years of Latin. I'm writing against the clock—we all are.)

When I'm finally satisfied that the elements of plot are in place, and I think that at last I know what my characters want, I type this draft into the computer. I print it out, then put the copy away for a few days. When I read it again, I immediately and cheerfully begin to tear it apart. Writers eventually find the composing process that works for them and stick with it. And they also experiment with the writing time. Some of us write in the morning, some late at night. Some of us have to sneak in minutes here and there from our hectic and disordered days. Some of us write in noisy restaurants, some in cozy offices. Some of those offices are windowless, some are open to the world. Some of us write in silence. Some of us put on music. Some of us shut out the world; others of us can be interrupted. Most of us write wherever we are, meaning we take along a notebook, memo pad, or laptop and jot down lines that might make their way to our story. Write at the desk, the kitchen table, on the bus, in the coffee shop, in bed, and while driving—but save those compound-complex sentences for the red lights.

Question 2: What inspires you to write?

The familiar definition of inspiration as “divine guidance or influence” seems fanciful, romantic, and false to a writer. We aren't inspired to write. We write and then we are inspired. The muse only comes to the writing desk. She's not hanging out at the pub or in the TV room or at the fabulous party. In other words, you don't wait, you write. There are many people who want to have written. Writers want to write. We don't have trouble sitting down at the desk. We have trouble getting up from the desk. We do so only when sometimes we have to go find new material or talk to some like-minded folks about writing and literature. On the other hand, inspiration understood as “stimulation of the mind or emotion to a high level of feeling or activity” is crucial to a writer. Trouble is inspiration. Art is inspiration. When I read a heartbreaking story or listen to sublime music or watch a spellbinding movie, I want to run to the desk and try to shape a story that will enchant and transport my reader in the way I was just transported. Creating art, itself, is also inspirational. I see a woman enter my fictional kitchen; I look closely; I see that she has something in her hand; I want to know what it is, I have to know,

but she won't show it to me; it's her secret, she says. Okay then, I'll write the scene in which her delicious secret is revealed. And that scene will inspire the next scene, and so on.

The world is inspiration. Just this morning I read about a murder in Hawthorne, Florida, a town of 1400 residents in Alachua County. A fifty-one-year-old man was killed by his nineteen-year-old daughter. The daughter and her mom, the estranged wife of the deceased, decided that with the husband dead they would receive his government benefits, whatever they were. The daughter said she'd do the killing if Mom would drive her to his mobile home. She killed him with a pickax while he slept. After several blows to the head and chest "The victim continued to make noise so she struck him with the axe until he was quiet to make sure he was dead." The two women cleaned the house and destroyed evidence and then called the police to report finding him dead. Well, I certainly have the trouble I need to start a story. I have the what, now I need the why. Also in the paper this morning and also from Hawthorne, which hasn't seen so much activity since Bo Diddley lived there, a seventy-four year old man was mauled by the neighbor's two pit bulls who tore off one of his arms and nearly severed the other.

Question 3: How do you start writing a story?

Well, we begin with a blank page that we try to clutter very quickly because nothing is as intimidating as too much freedom, nothing is as paralyzing as the blank page or empty screen. We begin immediately to impose limits, and we don't wait for these limits to appear. We present ourselves with, say, an image, and we do something to it. And then we do something else to it. Here's a vase. A glass vase. A green-tinted glass vase. It's midnight green. It's circular and a foot tall. We put it on the table, put some flowers in it. Let's put in some yellow roses. Two dozen. Now step back and appreciate the arrangement. Now, notice the florist card clipped to a stem. Read the card. Well, this wasn't what you expected, was it? Who is this Bobby anyway? Or we take a character and give him a name and a lot of trouble. Or maybe we just start with a line or a title or a theme. Whatever we do, we move the pen before we've thought too much. Put down a word. Any word. Put down another. Cross them both out. Put down a better word. Note that you would not have gotten the better, the more apt word without first writing those dispensable words.

Monty Python has a sketch called "*Novel Writing (Live from Wessex)*" in which a crowd has gathered in a sports stadium to watch Thomas Hardy write *The Return of the Native*. Hardy walks out to thunderous applause and sits at his desk. The crowd goes quiet. Hardy thinks, picks up his pen, dips it in the inkwell, and begins—with a doodle. A meaningless scribble! And then he signs his name beneath it. The play-by-play commentator remarks, "Oh, dear, what a disappointing start." But then Hardy recovers and writes the definite article *The* to open the new novel. Five of his eleven novels, we're told, began with the same word. But then he crosses it out and gazes off into space. He signs his name again. He manages a phrase and the crowd goes wild, but he's misspelled *November*. Our commentator says, "It looks like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* all over again." And so it goes. Writing a novel doesn't get any easier the second or the eleventh time you do it. And, unfortunately, you won't have fans in your writing room to

urge you on. There'll be no applause. Just month after month of putting it down and crossing it out and recasting yet another sentence once again.

When he was asked how he wrote his novels, Umberto Eco said, "From left to write." I would say, "Slowly and steadily." Every day. Word by word.

Question 4: What were you trying to say in your novel?

Academic discussions of novels are sometimes premised on the notion that a novelist has a statement of purpose and that said purpose results in the theme of the novel, as if the author has something to prove about the good and the evil in life. In fact, a fiction writer has nothing to prove. A novel is not a persuasive essay. Folks thinking that novels deliver messages might say to a writer, "What's your novel about?" and the writer will want to say something like, "It's about ninety thousand words," but he doesn't because he wants to be sweet and does not want to be dismissed as an effete snob or a smartass.

Whatever the novel is, it took every word to say it, and it cannot be dissected or distilled—at least not by the writer. That's what critics are for, I guess. Those who know the way but can't drive the bus, as Kenneth Tynan had it. Fiction writers have no message to deliver. If we did, we'd find a much easier and more expeditious way to deliver it. A message is the substance of a statement, and I'd like to think that every word in the final draft is substantial, every character, every scene, and every image. Remove the substance and the edifice collapses.

Question 5: Where do you get your stories?

Out there in the world mostly. At Home Depot and at Target, in the Self-Help & Recovery aisle at Barnes & Noble and in the checkout line at Winn-Dixie. Wherever people gather and wherever they seclude themselves. Writers pay attention. We notice. We listen, look; we stare. We touch, we note, we smile. We take what we find, and we apply it to what we remember, to what we think we know. We ask the person sitting at lunch with us what's going on, and when she tells us she still has the headaches and the double vision, but wearing the eye patch helps a bit, we borrow a pen from the waitress and start scribbling on the napkin. We buy our acquaintance another drink and her ask if that Roscoe Smith in the newspaper wasn't her cousin. Yes, that's what I thought. And what made the fool think he could dump his mama's body in a ditch like that? And so it goes. The truth is out there.

And you can count on this. Your family is full of stories. With your parents' help or your grandparents' or a professional genealogist's, make up a family tree. There are plenty of free family-tree building sites on the Internet. Print out a blank one and fill it out. And then find out everything you can about each of the people there. And then with that information to go on, imagine the rest. Write an anthology of family stories. Call it the "*Miami River Stories*" or whatever. Write about your Cousin Billy who—oh, that's right, you're waiting for Billy to pass on. Write about Uncle Gino then (but change his name) who left home at sixteen, became a cowboy out west for a while, and the next time you saw him he was on a TV newscast holding his baby hostage with a pistol aimed at her tiny head. This after his wife left him. Write about

your great-aunt Randeane who smuggled rum from Barbados to Key Biscayne in the twenties; your cousin Weezie who went to LA in the Fifties to make her fame and fortune in the movies, married a page at NBC, who left her and went on to become a well-known TV star. Talk to your family and find out who were the relatives they admired or despised. Dig through photograph albums, family Bibles, whatever you can find.

Question 6: How do you know when you're done?

We know we're never done. We know that our every effort is a failure. But we don't let that stop us. Failure only stops the non-writer. Rilke said, "The point of life is to fail at greater and greater things." Writing, like aging, is not for the timid. We put down the pen when we've done what we can to do justice to the lives of the characters in our stories, and we're anxious to move on to a new world. Stories and novels are not so much finished as abandoned.

Question 7: Who are your literary influences?

We're influenced by every writer that we've ever read and loved. And by those we haven't read because they influenced the ones we do. We've been stealing all along and learning how to make the quick transition between scenes, how to find the evocative detail, how to surprise and astonish. ("All art is theft." Picasso) We're all standing on the shoulders of giants; that's why sometimes it seems so easy to see so far. And we're influenced by our readers, by the people we're writing for. By the person who takes the time to tell us she appreciates an image that reminded her of a lost love or by the guy who tells us thanks, he was moved to laughter or to tears. We aren't writing for ourselves. The reader should know about her importance. Writing a story is the accomplishment of both the writer and the reader. The story is a collaborative endeavor. The writer provides the clues, a river say, and puts a character neck deep in the river, and the reader sees the arrow of ripples around the character's body, sees the gunmetal gray of the water. Umberto Eco put it this way: "Every text is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work." The point is this: that the making of a story is partly the achievement of the reader. If fiction is good, no two readers can be said to have read the same story.

But I digress. What was the question again? Literary influences. Let me mention a few of my own. First, there are the writers who influenced me to become a writer. They would include Dr. Seuss. The first book I ever read on my own was *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*. The first un-illustrated books I read were the Chip Hilton Series of young adult books for boys by LIU basketball coach Claire Bee published by Grosset & Dunlap with titles like *Triple Threat Trouble*, *Fourth Down Showdown*, *Hoop Crazy*. I was a little jock who dreamed of playing second base for the Red Sox, but what I learned in those pages was the excitement of a suspenseful story. Last game of the championship, and it's the bottom of the ninth with two out, a three-two count on the batter, a rookie pinch-hitter, the winning runs are on base. The crafty veteran pitcher winds up and fires a slider toward the plate. What's more suspenseful than that? And then later I found J. D. Salinger, Harper Lee, and Jack Kerouac. They all took me to another more compelling world than the one I was living in, and I wanted to be able to do that to a reader. I wanted to learn to cast a spell, to enchant. And then there are the writers who have

influenced, dare I say it?, my style. Better stated: I hope they have influenced my style. William Faulkner, Anton Chekhov (Chekhov above all), Alice Munro, and William Trevor.

Question 8: The writing life sounds just fabulous. How can I become a part of it?

Well, you're lucky, my friend, because writing is a very easy business to break into. No formal prerequisites. You pick up a pen and hire yourself. This ad from The Famous Novelists School, Inc. says it all: If you can write this sentence, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife," then you might have what it takes to become a famous, respected, and handsomely remunerated novelist. Act now! Send for the Famous Novelists Aptitude Test. If you score well or show other evidence of writing talent, you may enroll in The Famous Novelists School, Inc. Write in your spare time and in the comfort of your home! Writing novels today offers a life of financial reward, personal recognition, and the freedom to live as you please! But just know that, despite this beguiling but overblown ad, you may not become famous or wealthy or respected, and you will certainly not have time to go to parties or watch much television, and you will not get a day off, and no one you know will care if you write or if you don't. Still want to write? Well, no one can stop you but yourself. Write, and when you have finished something you love, send it off into the world.

Question 9: Are there any secrets to fiction writing?

Yes.

Question 10: Is it possible to make a living as a writer?

That depends on what you mean by living. According to *The Freelance Writer's Lot* by Nancy Duvergne Smith, the median income for a novelist or nonfiction writer is \$7500 a year. The League of Utah Writers reported: "The average income from writing received over the past 12 months for all writer members who actually reported any writing-related income [is] \$5,213.28." My advice? Marry a doctor. (Not an investment banker.) Keep the day job. You rephrase your question: How much income can I expect as a freelance writer, a novelist or short story writer. That depends. How many hours are you going to put in and how hard are you willing to work? Let's say you're a very successful novelist, and you get a remarkable \$100,000 advance for your novel. Let's say it takes you a modest three years to write it. That's \$33,333 a year. Can you live on that? But even that isn't as good as it sounds—you have to buy your own office equipment and supplies, pay your own health and other insurances. You get no pension, no paid holidays, no Christmas bonus. A standard yardstick is that you need to make twice as much if you're self-employed as you do as an employee to enjoy the same standard of living and level of security. The idea of writing stories, however, is to make a life not a living.

Question 11: How do you handle rejection and criticism?

Not very well, but I'm getting better at it. The writing life is a life of rejection. If you have a thin skin, do something else. There are two kinds of critics—the professional critic of whom Brendan Behan wrote, "Critics are like eunuchs in a harem; they know how it's done, they've seen it done every day, but they're unable to do it themselves." Hemingway called them "camp-following

eunuchs." One such professional critic, Diana Trilling wrote of *Delta Wedding*: "I find it difficult to determine how much of my distaste for Eudora Welty's new book . . . is dislike of its literary manner and how much is my resistance to the culture out of which it grows and which it describes so fondly." So much for the professional critic.

The other kind of critic is the fiction writer supplementing his or her income by writing reviews for newspapers and magazines—I do it myself. A group of critics is called a pride or a murder. And too often these murderers respond positively to writers who write like they do and scold writers who have the audacity to take risks in their work. Know that unseemly literary scores are settled in this ignoble public forum. Don't pay too much attention to them. You're not as good as they say you are; you're not as bad. Criticism is inevitable and welcomed because without it literary culture would collapse, but criticism as Auden said, should be a casual conversation, not the thunder and lightning and vitriol that it too often becomes. Still, better a tempest of invective than glacial indifference. Look at what it was that irritated the critic about your book, and go there. That's where you were doing something new, something he could not understand, and that's the itch to scratch.

It's not a good idea to respond to your critics. Alice Hoffman went on a Twitter rampage when her novel, *The Story Sisters*, received a lukewarm review by Roberta Sillman in the *Boston Globe*. She called Sillman an idiot and published her phone number and urged her fans to phone him with complaints. Such childish petulance is unseemly at best. When Alian de Botton got an unfavorable review in the *Times* for *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, he posted this comment on the critic's blog: "I will hate you till the day I die and wish you nothing but ill will in every career move you make." Ouch. Don't write a complaint, write another story.

Question 12: What is the future of writing and publishing?

I don't know how we'll be reading and writing our stories—on our iPhones, computers, Kindles, or in or on whatever other technological miracle is in the offing— but we will be reading and, specifically, reading stories. We need them to make sense of our lives and of our world. Lack of narrative sense leads to anxiety, and anxiety leads to damage. We have to tell our stories; we have to see our lives reflected in stories. Our fiction will certainly reflect the social networking, cyber culture we're living in because that culture is shaping us. (I still don't read anything online longer than a paragraph. Does that mean that electronically published stories will become shorter? Or does it suggest that I'm a Luddite?) Italo Calvino said that the last millennium was the millennium of the novel. I don't know what the primary narrative medium of this nascent millennium will be, but we will be telling each other stories. Just like when once upon a time we sat around the campfire talking about the day's woolly rhinoceros hunt.

In the June 2, 2010, NPR interview with Robert Siegal, author Nicholas Carr (*The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*) says that online reading yields lower comprehension than reading from a printed page. He suggests that we may have come to the end of the age when we associate the acquisition of wisdom with deep reading and solitary concentration. He notes, also, that research shows that as people get better at multitasking, they

“become less creative in their thinking.” Newspapers were going to make books obsolete at the end of the nineteenth century. Edison’s phonographs would mean that we would listen to books and not read them. And movies, of course, would make novels obsolete. And yet here we are still reading. If we agree with Carr that we are shaped by the medium we use, in this case one of distraction and association, then perhaps the age of the doorstep novel is over, but the age of the narrative trudges on. We may read for entertainment and for information and be very satisfied with newspapers while they last and with the Internet, but when we read for understanding, we will turn to stories, which engage us emotionally as well as intellectually and say to us this is what it’s like to be a human being, and this is how it feels.

Those of us who choose to will still sit in our quiet rooms and we’ll imagine brave new worlds and we’ll shape stories or poems or plays from the raw material. Literature is not going away. (“Narration is as much a part of human nature as breath and the circulation of the blood.” A. S. Byatt) Literature is our conversation with history; it is how we transmit our culture and our civilization. The future of writing is in this room.

The publishing future will likely be inkless and paperless for the most part. It will likely be more democratic and efficient. The fact is that any one of us with a computer and access to the Web is a potential publisher. We can, and some of us do, publish our books, distribute them through Amazon, operate our social network publicity campaigns, and we put out literary magazines with little or no overhead. Self-publication is more easily done now than it was in my youth, but self-publishing is not new, of course. Back then you needed a mimeograph or ditto machine, but every college and high school had several. (You might have had to break into an office now and then to gain access, but that was easy enough.)

Most of us, however, long for the imprimatur of agent, editor, and publishing house, all of whom will validate our efforts, soothe our anxious souls, and maybe line our pockets with silver. Computers and the Internet will certainly play a significant role in whatever the New York publishing houses decide they’ll do to get their books to us. Who can predict what that will be? The World Wide Web is in its infancy. It turns twenty-one on November 12 of this year. Book printing, by contrast, has been around for 1143 years. The oldest printed book, the *Diamond Sutra*, was published in 868 CE. I guess what I’m trying to say is that though the means of printing and distribution will surely change, good stories will always find their way into the hands of eager and generous and grateful readers, even if what is in their hands is an iPad, or it’s just letters floating in ether before their eyes.

Question 13: What advice do you have for a beginning writer?

“Read, read, read. Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the masters. Read! You’ll absorb it. Then write. If it’s good, you’ll know it. If it’s not, throw it out the window.” William Faulkner said that. And I’ll add to it by paraphrasing Ernest Hemingway: We’re all apprentices in a craft where no one becomes a master. So we’re always reading.

Always be writing. I know I'm repeating myself. Write on the bus, write in your pajamas, write a letter to your mom, write a story, write a song, write a grocery list (and turn that into a poem) write, write, write until your fingers bleed.

Learn to finish. Resist the inevitable idea for a better story until you're done with this one. Don't clutter your desk draws with half-written novels. You only learn how to write if you finish. But don't think you're going to finish today. Or next week, or next month.

Question 14: How can I get my story published?

Write something so beautiful, compelling, and transcendent that they can't say no.