On savoring a slow process

Writer Eugene Marten discusses getting enough sleep, finding a muse in his wife, and writing his drafts by hand.

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As told to Elle Nash, 3040 words.

Tags: Writing, Creative anxiety, Beginnings, Process, Day jobs, Time management.

I've known your work for a while because of Giancarlo DiTrapano and *New York Tyrant*. I had not yet read *Layman's Report*… Do you feel like your style or your sense of writing has changed in the decade or so since you first wrote the book? What was it that made you want to reissue it?

There are always sentences that bother me in stuff that has been published. There's a deadline, so you have to let it go, but there's always room for improvement. It's really as simple as that. And I think in the last 10 years, maybe [I have] gotten a little more refined and I don't have to try so hard to get the voice that I want. I can also relax a little bit without something getting too plain or banal-sounding or ingratiating, for that matter. I've grown a bit. Standards are slightly different and so you want things to be at a certain level.

That's really comforting to hear. I'm facing down a manuscript I'm about to start and part of me is just like, "Oh, it's hard every time I'm starting a new one."

Yeah. Oh, yeah. In first drafts, I just give myself license to really suck. And my first drafts are so bad. If you read them, you would be hard-pressed to believe that this would be something you might like later, honestly. So, first drafts are about getting there, about getting all the big pieces down and the content and so on, and then things get more and more refined. I kind of like that blank page at first because I've realized that it doesn't have to be great right off.

How many drafts do you feel like you normally go through before you feel like something's ready to be put out in the world?

First, I do two longhand drafts, and those are complete drafts. Every word is gone over and considered. The third draft is when I start typing, but it's the same process again. The whole thing is reread. I think after three or four, I start to be able to be satisfied with certain sections. And then I start concentrating on things that just are more problematic, that are going to be a tough nut to crack, probably for the duration of the process. But that doesn't mean that I won't come back to things and have an "aha" moment, or say, "Oh, wait a minute, this sucks. I thought it was okay, but I found a better way to do it."

Wow, longhand drafts. I know that there's a mind-body connection between actually writing something out rather than typing. I feel like that must do something different to the story.

It reflects the way I think, physically. In longhand, things run together and they're a bit sloppy and tentative, and that's the way I think in those early drafts. It's kind of [to] let it all hang out. So it does feel like that kind of connection, a sort of physical, visceral thing. And then as you go into typing, the words become more discrete units of sound. William Carlos Williams, the poet, came up in the industrial age and he compared it to nuts and bolts when he would type. It had that kind of feeling of working with something, of interlocking

pieces and so on. And as I make the transition from longhand to typing, that's kind of what it's like.

In a recent interview, you talked about how it's always content before form, but it's clear that that form is still something that you look highly upon. What is it that you think makes it so compelling, those interlocking pieces of language?

I think it's just about sound for me in writing. Before I faced up [to the fact] that if I wanted to do something creative, it was going to have to be writing, I would try other things. I was interested in filmmaking, and I tried to be a musician for a while. And I think it was the visceral aspect of those things that appealed to me. I thought, "Well, writing is just some dead words on a page. There's no real connection to it." I think I finally got to a point where I began to see that you can have a voice, and that is what brings the story to life for me.

I don't like it when writers talk about, "Well, style is something ornamental. Here and there you can do something, but other than that, you just let the story tell itself." I don't believe that. I don't think there is a story unless it has a voice in a certain sound. I think great writing has a sound. There's no song if you can't sing. I think what I was looking for in other mediums I've managed to try to achieve in writing. You have images, you have sound in that. Between form and content, I'm just looking for this perfect synthesis where the wine and the bottle are the same thing. It doesn't necessarily have to be a real obscure and challenging style. It could be very simple, like Raymond Carver edited by Lish, or a lot of Hemingway, or Joyce, or Joy Williams, a writer that I'm really addicted to. Her stuff is very simply written, but she still achieves that effect for me.

Where did these personal rules of style and form come from that create your voice? How did they evolve?

I don't know. I really don't like the obvious being belabored. If it's something that we both know is there, then it's almost a neurotic thing. I always feel like I'm insulting the reader's intelligence by saying something [obvious]. Let's say you're describing a TV show. I would rather describe it by the narrative than say what the name is, unless the name has a certain ring that's valuable in that context. But other than that, I think it's a cheap way to try to identify with the reader by naming brands.

In *Firework*, there's a scene where people are staying at some weekly-rate motel and they're watching cable, which they've never had before. And they're watching a movie that's obviously *The Terminator,* but I don't say "*The Terminator*." I thought it was more interesting to say it's about a robot who comes from the future to kill someone before they can grow up and kill them—or something like that, whatever the plot line was. I thought that just had a lot more resonance and permanence to put it that way. I think it evolves from personal things that annoy me, even conversational things that have extended into writing.

Could you talk about the ways that you've worked to prioritize your writing over the years? And has it ever been hard?

Yeah, yeah. As I got a bit older, when I started writing, I could write at any time during the day. I would get home after working an eight-hour day and I would write in the evening with no problem. I was married, still am. We had a five or six-year-old girl, and a new baby had just arrived. I had no problem with any of that, but later on, I just didn't have that energy. I can only write in the morning. But I can also do some things in the evening now because I don't have a day job anymore. Now I'm on a fixed income, but we're getting by, so I don't have to worry about that. I remember living in Portland, Oregon. It was a pretty tough time economically. I remember I was working 12-hour shifts at some job, and then in the morning I would get up, see my son off to school, and I was just not getting enough sleep and I was blocked. That's the only time I've ever really been blocked. I assumed it was a creative problem, but I just couldn't get rest. And I ended up getting frustrated and I burned this manuscript that I'd been working on for a couple of years. I think you have to develop routine and you've got to get enough sleep. That sounds simple, but that's what works for me.

What was it that you were feeling so frustrated with in the manuscript that you left behind?

That became *Firework*. There was a particular problem that I just could not solve in that. Writing is like a series of problems to be solved, for me, and I just couldn't do it. So I destroyed it and then a few years later, the

solution occurred to me. About eight years after I had destroyed it, it was kind of given back to me. I could feel it come back in, which was really cool because I thought it was just lost forever. It was a really hard feeling to live with for years. It felt like I'd sacrificed one of my own children or something. I couldn't get over it.

Your main characters live on the peripherals of experience, but often in wildly unique circumstances. I feel like one of the hardest things for me to do as a writer is to make a character that is very unlike myself feel believable on the page, especially if they're not redeemable. How do you work to get into that mental space of an environment or a person that is not necessarily familiar to your own experience?

I think it's just a matter of the longer you do it, and it's all part of cultivating that process. All that stuff that you're talking about of [characters] "unlike yourself," there's always some of it that's in you anyway. It's just in this different form or from a different point of view. It sounds maybe a bit corny, but all of us really do contain these whole populations, and not in some psychic way, but as you take in the world and other people, that's just how it gets processed inside you. And the longer you write and the more you keep at it, you just get this clarity about it.

There was a point when it was a bit more of a struggle to try to think of somebody that seemed radically different. And still, it's not easy, but you just have the faith that it's going to happen through successive drafts and working through things and not forcing things but letting them happen. There's effort involved in writing, but that's not where the effort has to be.

Is the effort more in the problem solving? Is that what you mean?

I think it's in the early drafts when you're like, "Okay, I've got the scene and these two people, they have to get together. They have to talk about this, or they have to do this, or this has to happen." And then I just throw it in there and just try anything, and put one foot in front of the other. That's sometimes where it does feel like you're forcing things a bit. But whatever you've put down—and this holds for whatever stage you're in in your writing—there's always a reason for it. So I'm loath to throw anything out. I always build things. Everything has a bit of a seed. So, even though it might seem arbitrary or random, there's an artistic reason that you put it down there, maybe a psychic or psychological one. And you might end up replacing it later, but you have to just follow it through and give it its due.

When you're working on a first draft, how long does it take you, usually? Or does it vary?

Life being what it is, there are interruptions. For what I'm doing now, I just finished this first longhand draft, but it's long. It's like, over 500 pages. This November, it would be two years [of writing the draft], but I had interruptions. I had ***Layman's Report***. I had to start revising that or working with my editor. Also, I moved from Ohio to New Mexico. Crap, that's a story in itself… One day, I might just get a paragraph done; another day I might get three pages done. But I don't get massive tons of pages done, ever. I'm pretty deliberate. I like to stop and think because I really enjoy the process. I savor it. And I always try to find myself in that proverbial zone, which the longer you do it, the more that seems to happen.

When did it start for you, with writing? *Waste* was self-published at first, wasn't it?

Yeah, that was back in '99. I pretty much did everything. The cover and all that, I did on a Xerox machine with Scotch tape and an X-ACTO knife. I had a hundred copies printed. I don't know if you've ever seen it, because I no longer have a copy and I can't find any more. But that was fun. I would just leave copies laying around in random locations with a bookmark [and] had my contact in it. It's like a message in a bottle.

I think the first time I tried to write a novel, it was a horror novel. I had this concept for it and didn't get further than one paragraph. When I would start things, I would just get a few sentences into it and the whole thing would pile up and become so overwhelming that I couldn't imagine how I would finish or how it would get done. It was literally paragraph by paragraph till I was able to actually finish a whole story, but even then, I had no idea of what rewriting was. When I was done, I was done. It was terrible, but I had no idea how to make it

better.

Actually, when I met my wife, I was living in this one-room place in downtown Cleveland, and I don't know, I think all those ingredients combined… all of a sudden, I figured out the trick to rewriting. I could feel the thing come to life. That sense of something being alive, that's the whole attraction to creativity for me. Before that, they were just inert words on a page. Once I met this person and we committed to each other, that seemed to jar something loose. And it's corny to call someone your muse and some people might think of it as sexist, but that's what she's been for me. It seemed things started to fall into place then, although it still took a long time and there was still a lot of back and forth. My relationship with writing was sometimes like the relationships people have, where they're with them one second, then no, they break up; they go back. It was like that. But each time I returned, it was with a greater degree of commitment and a little better idea of what I was doing.

I feel similarly, where I think my first attempt at a novel was a sci-fi novel about Project Blue Book and aliens. I think I got maybe 30 pages into it and then I was like, "I don't even know how to write a novel. What am I doing?"

There's almost a feeling of embarrassment: "Why did I think this is just so easy?" But you need that kind of naive confidence to get started. That novel, *Firework*—the first draft was almost 700 pages and it was just complete shit. It was through sheer force of will that I was able to get those down. And I think that's when I talk about putting one foot in front of the other because I wasn't in the zone yet then… There's this film called *The Taste of Things*. It's just about food and cooking and this chef. But he says he didn't believe in prodigies in food, that you can't even be a chef before you're 40. That's how I feel about writing, actually. I see these novels by people who are, like, 25 and the time is all over it. You see all the errors of youth that are in there and the clumsiness and the contrivance. I think things are rushed into existence, especially now in the age of gratification and whatnot. I trust writing from older people who have learned their craft, because you really can't rush it and [they have] lived a bit.

Maybe being young means we can make mistakes, but now that I've had a little bit of years behind me, I have hit this point where I feel not so rushed. I see the value in saying, "No, this takes work and time."

Right, and enjoy the process. Because when I'm in the thick of it, I really don't want it to end. I kind of get pretty bad postpartum now when I'm done with something. Maybe sometimes I won't start on something right away, but even if I do, I have to use that initial writing to push that out and displace it. But yeah, learn to love doing it. And for me, publication comes with all kinds of pains in the butt. So I savor the act of it all the much more now.

Eugene Marten recommends:

The Life and Times of Captain N. by Douglas Glover. The American Revolutionary War as seen from north of the border. Sort of a Canadian *Blood Meridian* but better. At 160 pages it has the richness of a novel twice as long.

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia. Television has gotten much more clever and semiliterate these days and I hate it. Glibness is not an art form. Give me dumb shit—laughs from the belly, not the brain—and these clueless, self-serving misanthropes never disappoint. Even the girl character is misogynist. Genius.

Wife Kelly's pork belly ramen, chorizo chili, homemade French vanilla.

The Perseid meteor shower as seen from the Very Large Array in Middle of Nowhere, New Mexico.

The desert.

Name
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Vocation
writer