

On transforming inspiration from others into your own work



Writer Justin Taylor discusses how to read deeply, working with internal chaos and learning from what you love.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2805 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Education](#), [Process](#), [Education](#), [Time management](#), [Inspiration](#).

First off, were you a child actor?

Yes.

I was expecting you to say, "No," and then I was going to ask about your research process. Do you mind talking about the child actor stuff and how it may have inspired this?

No, not at all. I grew up in South Florida. That's where I was born. And there was and maybe still is quite a bit of film and print, fashion, TV—all kinds of industry stuff. *Miami Vice* was filming down there in those days. And so, when I was an infant, my mom was told by another mother in a new mom's group that this business existed and that they were always looking for little models. The woman said, "Not only will they pay you, but your baby can keep the clothes."

That's what sold my mom on it. I think I was six months old and they took some headshots or full body shots, I guess. I mean, of a baby. Then when I was a little older, four or five or six, because I was a good reader, I could memorize lines, which was a pretty valuable commodity because a lot of times that's the hardest part of working with child actors. It petered out as I got older. Beyond a certain point you really had to start developing your craft or at least be a burgeoning teen idol, which, uh, was not in the cards for me. My acting career ended around the time that the character in *Reboot* starts, when he goes to LA and moves into that weird complex to do pilot season. That was something that was suggested I might do but never did. The last commercial I did, I think I was maybe 14, was for a new roller coaster at Cedar Point theme park. [The Mantis](#). At the time it was the fastest or tallest or something. They flew me up there and I rode this thing all day—you can find it on YouTube. But that was the end of the line for me.

Did you puke all day? That seems really intense.

I was terrified of roller coasters. The first couple rides were miserable and then I kind of got in the spirit of it.

So since the character does what you didn't, goes off and lives in this motel, did you have to do research for that part or did you just talk to some friends or use your own experiences and then extend them?

Some of it was just "What if?"—ing my life. Imagining if I had gotten this or that role, what choices that would have opened up and if I could have really gone the other way, where I went all in on acting. One that comes to mind is this Arnold Schwarzenegger movie called *Kindergarten Cop* that I was actually cast in. I had the part in

the movie then there was an executive note a couple weeks later that they wanted a younger kid and they wanted a Black kid. They thought that would be funnier to have Schwarzenegger with a Black five-year-old or whatever. So that didn't happen. And that Elijah Wood, Macaulay Culkin movie, *The Good Son*... I was second or third in line to play the part that Elijah eventually got.

But there was also some actual research. I read a bunch of child celebrity memoirs. There were a few in particular that I found very useful, which I can talk about, but with regard to the weird apartment complex where David and Shayne meet in the book, *Rising Star*, that came out of a book called *Fame Junkies* by Jake Halpern. The first chapter is about this place in LA that caters specifically to people coming in from out of town to try make their kids get famous. I can't remember what it's called offhand. It has a much more innocuous name than the one I gave it. The writer [Anika Levy](#) read a draft of the novel in manuscript (she read a few of them actually, she helped me a lot) and she recognized the place immediately. I think she grew up around there. The child actor memoirs were Corey Feldman's *Coreyography*, which is a really interesting book, and Jodie Sweetin, the middle kid from *Full House*, her memoir, *unSweetined*.

Clever title. What does your work entail on the day to day? What's your writing process? Do you have any rules for yourself, or?

I don't have a lot of rules. I'm not good at patterns and routines, and I'm not particularly disciplined. I work in a lot of different genres. From the outside it might look like there's a consistency in rigor here, I mean in that I am usually working on something and because a lot of it is journalism I might have a bunch of bylines in a given year, I mean not that anyone but me would notice, but if you did. Anyway my point is that from the inside it doesn't feel consistent or rigorous. It feels like fucking chaos all the time. But you can get away with some chaos when you're bouncing between shorter things: a story, an essay, some book review that's 700 words long and is done in a week. A novel, or any book-length project, demands rigor and discipline. There's a dailiness to it. It's like a training regimen or a diet or whatever you have to stick with. Which is not how I prefer to work.

The closest thing I have to a practice is to do something for the writing every day. As long as I'm giving it something, I almost don't care what that thing is. Writing, revising, research, reading, taking a long walk, sitting around doing nothing except for feeling bad until it's so unbearable that I finally sit down and do in two hours what I've been dreading doing for three weeks. It all counts as work. If you've got a bunch of things going, hopefully you finish them at different times and publish them at different times and from the outside it looks consistent and sane, or whatever it's supposed to look like. The one practical thing I am a fanatic about is this: when I am writing, I write everything longhand. Always first draft longhand, type it up, print it out, edit it longhand, type it back in. Over and over.

That cycle is really important to me. I also do a lot of reading out loud. Not to get too woo woo about this, but I want to make writing a somatic and haptic experience, connect the brain to the hand, connect the voice to the breath... That is where a lot of the work gets done. The computer, I don't know, the computer feels like... I don't want to say a "cursed space," but it is such an overdetermined space. You know what I mean? My work is on here. In COVID, my therapy was on here. Right now, we're doing this interview on here. My text messages forward to here. Movies, social media, breaking news, everything. And it never stops. But your writing is something you need to be alone with. There is no substitute for solitude. For me, the analog page and talking to myself is the best way to achieve it.

The present tense plot in *Reboot* takes place in less than a week, but the backstory goes on for decades. How do you approach backstory and back flashes? I felt like you did it so seamlessly.

Well, thank you. In the early drafts of this book, the front story spanned a lot more time. I got much more into the attempts to reboot the show. But everything felt really slack. I didn't think I had enough plot to justify the timeline that I was trying to work in.

And I thought about something that an old teacher of mine used to say. I think it was [Jill Ciment](#). I can hear it in her voice in my head. She used to say that if the plot lacked tension, before you go jamming new plot in, try compressing the timeline of what you have. So I started pushing everything closer together. It makes each thing

lean on the next thing. Screenwriters have a saying along the same lines, which is, "Turn 'and' into 'because.'" It took me a long time to learn how to do that, but I think I got there.

I always knew there had to be a lot of backstory because the whole premise of the book is they're trying to reboot this show, and through that, they're relitigating their relationships to each other back then and their own legacies and whatever. It was always supposed to be a 20th anniversary reboot, which set a lot of clear parameters. It determined how old they were in the present action of the novel and how old they'd been when they were on the show, which determined when they had to have been born, and therefore what other (real) shows they'd have been airing alongside, whose careers they're jealous of. Once those structures were in place, I felt a lot of freedom to call up the backstory as needed and I tried to make it pretty seamless.

I know that you teach college students, too. What do you want people to learn from you?

I mostly teach writing workshops, sometimes literature seminars. This summer, I did a grad seminar on the short novel. We read *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *Train Dreams*, *Lucy*, *Mrs. Caliban*, *Log of the S.S. the Mrs Unguentine*, and *Pedro Paramo*. I'm trying to teach a love of reading and a certain depth of reading—a form of attention—that maybe students, undergraduates for sure, have never done before. A lot of them don't even know you can read this deeply; nobody's ever modeled it for them. What is good attention to a text? How do you get from "I liked this" or "I didn't like this" to "Why is it what it is? Why did the author want to do it this way rather than any other way they could have done it? How can I steal something from this that I can use?"

Those are the things that I really try to get across, almost irrespective of what I'm teaching.

In a workshop it's different because the student work drives the conversation. A student turns in a 20 page story and says, "I wrote a story about X." And ten people read it and hand it back and basically say, "Yeah, it's actually about Y, not X, but there's only 7 page of the 20 that are really about Y. Which we loved. The other 13, we don't know what you were doing." A student might be bummed by that response but I will tell them that's really good information to have. At that point you can say, "Fine, my readers liked Y. I'm going to go all in on Y." Or you can say, "Screw you. It's a story about X, and I know you liked Y better, but I'm going to cut all that shit out of there and double down on X until it's doing what I want it to do."

I think those are the main things. That and the love of sentences. I think aesthetics are the building blocks of thought, of language, of story. I think a story should be about its own sounds and its own energy before it's about anything else. That's a very counterintuitive idea to a lot of people, and it's very hard to learn—both how to do it and why you'd want to. So yeah, we spend a lot of time on that, just being like, "Doesn't this sound good? Don't you want to write something that sounds like this?"

So with deep reading, or reading in the way that a writer should, what tips do you give? What are some concrete tips, or what do you tell your students to focus on when they're reading?

Going slow is a big one. Being willing to reread is another. It's true that all reading is rereading. At least in a sense. When you're going through something the first time, you spend a lot of time learning the rules of the game you're being asked to play. You're trying to keep track of what's happening. You're trying to clock your own reactions to it. Maybe you're catching every detail, maybe you're not. You're deciding whether you're enjoying yourself, whether you want to keep going. All that's as it should be.

If it's good enough, if you liked it enough, or even if you didn't like it but something about it is still laying claim to your attention, then maybe you flip back to page one and start again. Tomorrow or next year or whenever. This time you know what you're getting into, you have the big picture, so you can pay more attention to the small stuff. How is this scene constructed? What seeds of the ending can I see in the beginning? I don't mean foreshadowing. I mean creating the conditions of a conclusion that feels at once shocking (I did not see that coming!) and inevitable (of course it had to be that way!).

It's so often right there from the very first page, and once you see that you see that most stories aren't about constantly adding new stuff, they're about starting with a few very rich elements and then ramifying them as

completely as you can. If you're reading as a writer, you need to be able to see that in any given text, then you need to see the particular way it was done in this particular text, then you want to think about how to translate that knowledge into the thing you're working on—not to steal the technique itself (though you can) but to come up with a technique of your own that will be just as powerful for whatever it is you're trying to achieve.

It's worth remembering that before they are anything else, these things are entertainments. That is the idea. They can be literary works of high moral seriousness that lay bare the mysteries of existence and redeem our suffering and stop wars and all that other shit they do, but still they are commercial products. We went to a store and paid some money in the hope of being shown a good time. Whatever a good time means to each of us. So maybe that's really what I'm trying to teach: an expanded sense of what constitutes a good time.

Justin Taylor recommends:

As It Was Give(n) to Me by Stacy Kranitz - Gorgeous, astonishing, brutal, bizarre, profound and tender photographs of Appalachian people and places taken by an artist with deep roots in the region.

"Wes Picked a 4 Hour Playlist by Taylor Swift" - my friend Wes (age 7) put a ton of work into curating this playlist of rare & live Taylor tracks. It was originally 4 hours long but a bunch of songs got taken down a few days later so it's now a relatively svelte 2:48.

The Sewanee Review - I work for the school and I write for the magazine so, you know, grain of salt, but seriously, it's one of the best journals out there and you should subscribe.

Get the purple one - You ever go into the trucker-supply section of a Love's gas station and see those silicone seat cushions? They're like an inch thick and they've got this honeycomb pattern that supposedly redistributes your weight in such a way that you can drive forever without wrecking your lower back and maybe you've seen them many times before and have always thought to yourself, *Oh come on*. Like how could what they're claiming possibly be true? There's a blue one and a purple one. The purple one costs twice as much as the blue one and when I asked why, some guy—not a Love's employee—told me "Well, it's twice as good." So I went for it and, friends, it changed my life. Over the course of the first hour of driving with it on the seat, all the pain that had been gathering all morning just drained right out of me and never came back. It felt the way water swirling down a bathtub drain looks. Non-slip cover machine washable cold, hang dry.

Driving across the country - I did it twice this summer. See previous entry.

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Vocation

writer

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Stephen Alvarez