

On finding your own perspective



Author and teacher Ladee Hubbard discusses writing daily as a means of figuring out what to say, looking at one story from a variety of perspectives, and honoring whatever process works best for you.

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As told to Hurley Winkler, 2330 words.

Tags: Writing, Education, Process, Mentorship, Time management.

I recently took a workshop with you, and one element you'd return to during our discussion was the clarity of the writing we were discussing. What are some mistakes you notice writers making that prevents their work from coming across as clear to readers?

I think I was talking about being very careful about using the right word. Taking time with language. Some things are intentionally unclear, though. I think about that myself, and I talk about that in terms of being as precise as possible. Sometimes in class, I'll ask questions about what is actually going on here under the surface, as in, "What are you getting from this?" It all comes back to clarity. Thematic clarity.

One way to get clearer is to step outside and try to see the work with new eyes. One idea is looking at the writing from the perspective of a different character within it. Just a way to compel looking at what's going on from a different angle and to remember that there are different angles.

With your own work, when you feel like you're really, really close to it, how do you get some distance?

Sometimes things are very simultaneous for me. The idea of figuring out the structure is very much connected to figuring out what the story is about. It takes me a really long time sometimes just to figure out what the structure is. I'll think I know what I'm writing about, but then when it comes to how I actually express it or represent it on a page, I realize that clarifying to myself what it is I want to say is really intrinsically tied to how I mean to say it, or how am I going to actually put all this together in a way that makes sense and also feels right to me.

I tend to overwrite, and I tend to just do that out of habit. I'll look at things from as many different angles as possible. For me, it is very connected to, I guess, sort of a search for clarity. What is the proper shape? I feel like a lot of times when I'm writing, it's like I'm trying to figure out what I think about something. It will be something that I'm kind of obsessed with or an image or a person or some dialogue or something that's going on in the world, and trying to write it is really part of the process of trying to understand what it means to me.

What does your day-to-day writing life look like?

I usually wake up really early and try to write for at least an hour or two every day. I try to get up at five every day. I'm in a much better mood for the rest of the day if I do that. It's good for everybody involved if I just try to carve out some time in the beginning of the day to write before I have to drive my son to school and stuff like that. That's what I try to do.

Before I started recording our conversation, you told me you did a month-long residency this summer. What did your writing schedule look like during the residency when you didn't have anything else going on?

It was really nice to be able to do that and to not have to necessarily get up at five. No, it was great. It was really great. It depends on your situation at home, but certainly for me, because I have three kids, it was just a revelation like, "Oh my gosh, this is the most amazing thing ever." You can actually make your own schedule and stuff like that. Residencies have been really important for me to get a lot of work done.

A lot of writers, myself included, can get intimidated when met with that much sprawling time to work on something at a residency. My reaction to that is putting pressure on myself and setting overly ambitious goals, like, "I'm going to draft a whole novel in three weeks!" But then I realize, no, that's impossible. How do you set realistic expectations for yourself during a residency?

Oh, I don't know. I remember when I was younger, people would say, "Oh, I procrastinate so much," and dah, dah, dah. When I'm in residency, I'm very aware that this is borrowed time. It is really precious. Again, I think so much of writing for me often is trying to figure out what it is I'm trying to say. Maybe it is because I overwrite, and at this point I am aware of how I work, trying to look through different scenes and find what will work for me. That actually takes most of the time, probably, in terms of writing novels. I just try to do that and ask myself different questions or put characters in different scenarios.

I definitely set deadlines for myself and goals for myself, but I think what I'm trying to say is that I'm also very aware that I have to figure it out before I can do all of that. I feel very happy and satisfied if I can just get it clear in my mind. It's not that I don't wish I could write faster sometimes, but it doesn't really help to write fast, and then I can't feel it. It's not really what I wanted to say, or it just doesn't feel right, or the language doesn't sound right. I personally have nothing to do with what anyone else thinks about it.

Writing every single day no matter what—for you, it sounds like it's all about discovery and being immersed.

It really, really is. I know everybody has a different process and a different relationship to writing, but that kind of is what mine is. That doesn't work for some people, but it depends on your relationship to what you're doing, and everyone has a different process. You try to figure out what works for you and what is really satisfying for you. That's a question that's really personal, and you have to figure it out for yourself.

I want to ask about setting and place in writing. The settings in your work are so evocative. You spent time in a lot of different places growing up—has that had an effect on the way you incorporate a sense of place in your writing?

I was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Then, when I was two, we moved to Oakland, CA. Then when I was around seven, she moved to the Virgin Islands. Then I came back and I actually went to high school in Poughkeepsie, NY. My mother moved around a lot, and I think in part that's probably why I write about Florida so much—every summer, I would stay with my grandparents in St. Petersburg, FL. Even though that was not where I lived with my mother, Florida had some continuity for me.

Moving so much and being in so many really different social contexts made me aware of how the way people respond to you can be so radically different depending on where you are. It made me aware of how identity changes, depending on where you are, and how people respond to you. How people interact with you can be very, very different depending on where you are and what they think of you. That's part of, I think, my own sensitivity to setting: how it affects the interpretation of identity.

That's part of the reason why my kids and I have lived in different countries. I really wanted them to understand that there's not really sort of a fixed definition of how they would be perceived in the world or who they were. There are so many different definitions that exist now. I never wanted to feel very fixed in terms of, "Because I am this race, this gender, this, that, this is how I'm perceived, this is who I am, and that is a specific set of circumstances that I have to contend with." I think that it made me very aware of that.

Being a teenager in Florida versus being a teenager at a really tiny Quaker school in Poughkeepsie versus being an African-American on an island where everyone looks like me but isn't culturally alike but we're not culturally—it wasn't even like, "Oh, I feel alienated." I think it very much impacted my awareness of the relationship between character and setting.

It's interesting hearing you talk about this, and I find myself thinking about it through the lens of your most recent book, which is a collection of linked stories set in the same place, exploring one community over the course of several decades. I want to ask a question about that book: what made you decide to write it as short stories rather than a novel?

See, that's really interesting. I started thinking about it when I was much younger. My mother was so excited when Obama was elected, and I could not quite muster the euphoria that she had. Writing that book was almost like an investigation of my own cynicism about what was going on in the country at that time. It sort of stayed with me.

Also, I was really interested in the ways that, in the eighties and nineties, people talked about race and class. Just thinking about how language has changed. I always say that book was, for me, about communal grief, but I think it also had to do with a loss of language. The emptying out of a lot of words and terms that I feel like, maybe 20 years prior, had been a really potent means of expressing yourself. I just felt like the language had been so eroded. I wanted to talk about that as a communal issue. Maybe you can see that as part of my process itself, because it's told from so many different perspectives.

All of the stories in that book are really, really different in terms of structure, and that was part of what was the hardest thing to write: to be as true as possible to each specific perspective in terms of how those stories were shaped.

Does revision usually look similar from book to book for you, or is it drastically different for every project?

It's different for every project, but most of what I'm doing is revision, if I'm honest. There are initial ideas, and then it's like, maybe in the morning, I'm just writing to myself and trying to work through characters, but most of it really is revising and trying to figure out what the point is, and then find the clearest and cleanest way to get to it, the most immediate way to get to it. A lot of times I'll have an idea and a basic sense of a shape, but then it's like, how do you actually figure out what you're saying and actually put it on a page that makes sense to you? That, as you know, can take years.

Most of it is really revising. We said that everybody has a different approach, but I must find, on a certain level, something deeply satisfying about that process. I do it every day.

When you draft, are you usually going back and changing a lot before you move forward? Or do you try to push through to the end of a draft and then look at it and start again?

I'll get very hung up on the language, so if the language doesn't feel right, it'll be very hard for me to push forward. Sometimes I try to force myself to just get through the whole thing and not do that. Then it's really just a summary. Sometimes, when you look back, that's really helpful. A lot of times I'll put things down, and then when I look at them, I don't know, months later, I'll be like, "Oh my god, I'm so glad that at least I wrote it all out."

Is that the most amount of outlining you'll do, or do you do traditional outlines?

I usually don't do outlines aside from that. It just feels like a really rough summary. "Then they went there and they did this, and this happened, and somehow they wound up over here." Again, it's like a revising thing when I understand everything, but I just want to check in terms of themes or if there is repetition of images or something like that. It's just to keep track of everything, but usually that's very close to the end that I can.

I'm trying to be honest about my own process here. Again, everybody works so differently. I understand that, and I respect that, but this is what works for me, and I think that's a big part of it. Just taking yourself seriously as a writer wherever you are in your career can be hard enough, and part of that is respecting what works for you and knowing you don't have to do anything the way anyone else does it. Just whatever works for you: that's right and good.

It's a lot of work to take writing seriously for a very long time. You're not getting paid for it, but it is work. It's literal work that you're doing. I think it's important to cultivate. It's also important for your own writing and just allow yourself to be the writer that you are. You don't have to be anyone else. You don't have to write about things that other people write about. Just figure out what you are doing and respect it, because it's important. I think it makes you a better writer, actually.

Ladee Hubbard Recommends:

Pilot G2 Fine

Sharpie S-Gel

Uni-ball Jetstream

Pentel EnerGel

Bic Round Stic

Name

Ladee Hubbard

Vocation

writer, teacher

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Vilma Samulionyte