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June 10, 2021 -

As told to Maddie Crum, 2170 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Success, Inspiration, Focus.

On knowing when a project is done

How do you begin a work of fiction as opposed to an essay? Is there a different head space that you enter into, or is it in some way similar?

I think they're different. They're different modalities. When you start an essay, you know you're going to write an essay. I mean, when I started my essay on "My Night at Maud's," it was almost as if I was going to write about myself, not about the film, and I love this mixing of the two.

But I think that when I start a novel, I know I'm starting a story. I know I'm starting an imaginary trip down a lane that I know is going to be plot-oriented or semi-plot-oriented. Whereas an essay, usually I know I'm in an essay, but the prose is the same, the voices are very similar. I hate when I sound academic because I don't like that. I've never liked that. But I think that you know at some point that you really are going to be writing something that is more based on somebody else.

When you're writing fiction or maybe essays too, do you consciously or unconsciously make space for readers to enter the work?

I think I do that through style. Through style I try to create a very neutral, but not necessarily sort of rugged, but very neutral tone in my prose, which is sometimes incantatory so that essentially the reader can slip into my rhythm and by slipping into my rhythm to begin to sort of borrow my acoustics, my sense of smell, my sense of eyesight and so on. I want them to borrow me, as it were, as their guide. The sentences tend to be bit longer so that you can wade through them, feel comfortable and not get lost. I hope you don't get lost. And then if you end up seeing things that I see, it's because I've allowed you to do that.

And I love when people write to me and say, "you've written about me." No, I couldn't possibly know who that person is, but basically what I've done is I've mapped out a sort of universal identity, which people could say, "Yeah. I'm that. I've done that. I thought that. Gee, how come I never thought about it? But I knew it." Basically I think that a good writer never tells you anything you're unfamiliar with. It's just telling it to you for the first time, because you've thought about it, you've lived it, but you never really considered it.

Your latest book is a collection of essays about unrealis moods or states in which an event has not yet happened, is unlikely to happen, and is no less real for not having happened. You might even call these moods fantasies. What originally drew you to this subject?

I noticed that in my own life, I spend a lot of time remembering things because I write from memory and I have a past that is more or less lost because I was born in a place from which I was kicked out and I could never go back, or I don't want to go back. But the sense of the past has always inhabited me. Even though sometimes I would frequently say that I was not even a nostalgist, but I'm in memory lane all the time. And at the same time I fantasize a lot, which I think we all do quite a bit, more than we claim we do. And I realized that most of our time is not spent in the present tense.

Yes, we live in the present tense, and we all want to claim that we live in the here and now, and we know what we're doing, et cetera, but frankly we're skidding usually from past to present to future. And I realized that I'm not even in the future, I'm in the conditional, which is, as you said yourself, the might be, the might have been. And I realized that most of my books end in the conditional mood, they

don't even end in the present tense, "Tonight we would have done this, had we not been doing that." That's how I end everything because I don't know how to end it.

I realized that when I really like a work of art, a book, a movie or whatever, I notice that what I'm looking for is how the person is really not rooted in the present tense. We don't have anchors in the present tense. We claim we do and we want to think that we do, but we don't.

I'm interested in the relationship between this unreal mood and literary realism. How can realism accommodate fantasy or visions of the world other than as it is? Or do you think realism as a mode is not suited to that?

I mean, we've had the realist tradition for at least 150 years. That's what most art is all about, capturing life as it is. But if you look at what every writer writes about another realist writer, they say he thinks or she thinks she's writing about the present tense and how things are, but they're really fantasizing. So authors themselves are constantly accusing one another of not capturing reality as it is. And I'm saying, "Who cares?" I mean, Matthew Arnold famously said that the idea is to see things as they in themselves really are, and then Pater answers and says, "The important thing is to know what our impressions are as they in themselves really are." And Oscar Wilde says the important thing is not to see things as they are. So everybody's in disagreement about what really happens.

You seem to be drawn to art that exists somewhat out of time or that resists an engagement with very current events. Would you say that's always been the case for you?

Yes, because I hate being wedded to the contemporary. I've always hated that. There's a good reason for that. I mean, I come from a place where—I've had to make my life happen in the United States. And so what I look for are the things that are permanent. I'm not interested in things that are here today, gone tomorrow. That's why I hate TV series. They're all about a show that's here today, gone tomorrow.

I wrote a novel that was set in New York City and it takes place between Christmastime and New Year's. And it's about two people who meet and fall in love. And so I was very interested in capturing the city in that holiday mood, not necessarily festive, but kind of leisurely. People are just spending time doing things that they would normally not do during their work day. And people accused me of saying, "You don't know what his last name is. You don't even know what he does for work. You don't know anything about his current life and worst of all," that's what a critic said, "worst of all, you're setting your novel in 2000 and something New York City in the snow and you never mentioned 9/11."

And I'm thinking of all those writers who, as soon as 9/11 happened, they had to write about it. They had to sort of hastily put their best efforts into capturing the city 9/11. You know what? I was there at 9/11. I saw the catastrophe. I lived through it, but it wasn't part of what I wanted to capture about New York. I leave that to other writers.

Everybody has been asking about COVID. Of course I lived through COVID. I've been vaccinated. I've had people whom I know died of COVID. And I don't want to write about COVID. I've finally written a piece of COVID, wondering who will we be after COVID? I wasn't interested in capturing COVID as it is. I was interested in, how will it change us?

It's not very fashionable to write outside of the world as it currently is. So are there contemporary artists or writers or filmmakers who you would put in this category?

Wong Kar-wai. He's a Hong Kong filmmaker; he made a movie called *In The Mood For Love*.

Oh, I love that film, yeah.

Oh, you love that one, see? Wong Kar-wai basically lives in today's Hong Kong. But he was trying to capture this old Hong Kong that he couldn't remember because he was a kid. And that film is absolutely divine because it captures the dynamics of two human beings who are not living in the sexual revolution, who basically can hardly touch each other's hands. That's a great director because he's stepping out of time.

Many of your essays involve you inserting yourself into a work of art using your imagination. You're the boy in the painting or the man in the film. So, what is the value for you in this sort of reader-response criticism?

I'm not trying to be subjective, but I do connect with a work of art. And I think that every every very good critic usually has a point of view that is embedded in something personal. In other words, they are reacting to what they see, and the reason why they see what they see is because there's something in their eyesight, in their personal history, which they don't have to disclose to you, but it's there. It is their sensibility. And so when I intrude on an essay or I present myself there, it's because I want my sensibility to become more obvious to the reader so that he understands, or she understands that basically I am reacting to this work, not in an impressionistic way, but in a very critical way. But at the same time, I'm also confiding to the reader how it is that I've come to that conclusion.

Where do you do your work and what things do you need in order to do it?

You know what? I used to have a small table in our bedroom and I used to work in the bedroom and I could hear the kids fighting and crying and laughing in the next room. I mean, that's how life is. You have to

be able to write wherever is possible. Eventually we added another apartment to our apartment, bought the small apartment next door, and now I have my study. So I have my study, I have my space, if one wants to call it that. And all I need is water or coffee. That's all it is. I mean, really it's very minimal. And I answer e-mails all the time and I answer phone calls and I don't mind being interrupted. I don't mind because I don't have a very busy social life, so my social life is the interruptions that I get. And if I'm not interrupted, it means I have no friends, and what kind of person is that?

As far as your creative work is concerned, how do you define success and how do you define failure?

Success is when you feel you've finished something that has a semblance—because I never know how to finish anything—that has a semblance of closure. At least you feel that the closure will work, even if it's a stop-the-bleeding kind of closure. But you have to. So when you know you've done something and you feel that you've said something, that you think maybe nobody's going to like it, that's success. I don't have any sense of whether an editor is going to like what I write, buy what I write. I have never been able to guess that. But there are times when I feel that this piece stands by itself. It's okay. It's even good.

The ones that I'm not happy about were when I felt that I was basically BSing. I was not committed to it. There was nothing in it that I resolved about something that I consider important. Nothing that meant much to me. It was just an exercise in writing. There are pieces that I've written that I feel I never managed to sort of put myself into it, it was just an exercise in BS.

How do you know when a project is done?

Well, if you write the way I do, which means that you start something and you rewrite it, especially the beginning part, you rewrite it time and time and time again, at some point you feel, not that it's beyond repair, but that there's nothing more you can do to fix it. In other words, as far as you're concerned, that's what you were going to write.

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