

## FOR WRITERS

### Part I: The Writing

When thinking about going into writing as a career you have to ask yourself to do the unthinkable - turn art into something you think about as a business. There are no muses here. The 'muse' needs to be redefined as the feeling you get, however fleeting, when the words are coming easy and you don't feel like you want to fucking kill yourself by ramming your head into a computer screen filled with your own "magic."

#### **Decide what kind of book you want to write**

*"There was never a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He is too many people if he's any good." -F. Scott Fitzgerald*

- Do you want to tell YOUR story or A story? § Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.
- Do research:
  - When your book sells, which section would it be in at the local bookstore.
  - Are there other books that are similar to yours?
  - How are they different?
  - How is yours better? \* this information will be used later in your Agent Query Letter, as well.

#### **Read, Absorb and Percolate**

"It is worth mentioning, for future reference, that the creative power which bubbles so pleasantly in beginning a new book quiets down after a time, and one goes on more steadily. Doubts creep in. Then one becomes resigned. Determination not to give in, and the sense of an impending shape keep on at it more than anything." -Virginia Woolf

- Now, this is a very personal choice - I know, that when I'm writing I can't read or really watch anything remotely, even tangentially, similar to my work - it's too

influential, it's too whatever - needless to say, Jedi Mind Tricks would absolutely work on my weak mind.

- But, in off times I think Stephen King said it best, "It's hard for me to believe that people who read very little - or not at all in some cases - should presume to write and expect people to like what they have written. Can I be blunt on this subject? If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time - or the tools - to write. Simple as that."
- Now, I also learn from screenplays and movies - which definitely lessen my enjoyment factor, sure - but it's good to just always be aware of how people tell good stories, and why they're good or bad and how you can learn from that.
- It's also interesting to note which characters stayed with you and why. Who you rooted for, who you waited for to appear in the scene and who you identified with the most and why.

### **Write**

*"When in doubt, have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand."  
- Raymond Chandler*

- This is the shitty part.
- Because I didn't go to college or take a writing class and at the time held a full-time job, I decided to learn writing from these little Saturday Workshops at Vroman's Bookstore in Pasadena, California. It was during one of these workshops that I saw David Ebershoff, who came to speak on writing while keeping a full-time job. I remember several things that Mr. Ebershoff said that day. Notably:
  - He made a goal for himself to only write one page a day. One. He could write more, but it was all gravy after the goal had been met.
  - He kept a calendar on his refrigerator and would religiously mark how many pages he would produce everyday - his only goal, again, being to finish simply ONE page.
  - On the days that he skipped writing, he had to now look at that empty box for a full month.
  - He said that because of this, he found himself writing everyday, just so he could mark it on the calendar.

- I did what Mr.Ebershoff said, and found myself making head way into a novel I didn't think I could write. I proudly wrote to him when I got to 100 pages. He wrote back congratulating me and encouraging me to finish. I still have the letter to this day.
- I found that I didn't need the calendar so much after while; I had gotten past the hard part...starting.
- I also remember something else that happened that day.
  - During the Q and A period, this woman raised her hand and said, "You seem to have a cushy life," At the time, Mr. Ebershoff was the publishing director of Random House's classics imprint, Modern Library - not so much 'cushy'. She continued, "I can never seem to find the time to write. I'm way too busy." It wasn't so much a question as it was a statement. Mr. Ebershoff simply responded, "Then you don't get to be a writer." It's really that simple, isn't it? Make time or not. But, in the end you're the only one who really misses out.
- I found that I could use the writing as this light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak. Something to look forward to, besides the drone of my work week. It was my little secret: I was getting out. It was very Michael Scoffield from Prison Break...without the full body tattoo, of course.
  - One of the best things I've found in writing, is the Not Writing. Walking around percolating, running shit through your head - Rudyard Kipling called it 'hatching'. This is where the real work gets done. Allow it.
  - *Bottom Line*: Figure out a schedule that works for you. The hardest thing to do is to understand yourself as a writer. Don't follow any advice that feels wrong - if you can't write everyday, don't. If you feel you need to write more, make a bigger goal. If you can only write on weekends, then set a goal for that. I guess my point is: do something and finish what you started. Set up some kind of framework that works for you, but still challenges you to move forward.
- The scary part is you're going to realize that you're kind of a nicer, saner person when you're writing. Not as restless. Not as distracted. You have this purpose to you. Maybe I'm just projecting here, but I find a very deep solace in the act of writing. It calms me - and when I'm not doing it, not deeply entrenched in one of my made up worlds - I tend to be very...well, elsewhere.

## **Finish**

*"Great is the art of beginning, but greater is the art of ending."  
-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

- Stephen King, once again, said it best in his memoir, *On Writing* (highly recommended reading), that you should close the study door and just write right on through until the end. Straight.
- Don't go into detail about what you're writing, why you're writing, asking random people if they maybe want to take a look at the first chapter? Just write.
- Don't let anyone rain on your parade, etc...you'll end up editing the first chapter for 10 years, trust me. The legend is that they used to find Henry James in the aisles of bookstores penciling in new and improved edits to his works. It has the very real capability to be all consuming and never-ending, if you let it.
- But, in the end - it's much easier to edit than it is to look at a blank page...plus with every draft comes a deeper understanding of your themes, plot and characters.
- After the first draft is finished, put it away for awhile - you can do this by allowing someone to read it - choose carefully, friendships and marriages have ended over less - or just by putting it into a drawer for a couple of weeks. This will give you fresh eyes when you go back for Draft Two. And valuable percolation time, as well.
- And hell, after the first draft is finished raise a glass and celebrate. You've done it...you've finished.

## **•Some Tools**

*"Good writing is supposed to evoke sensation in the reader. Not the fact that it is raining, but the feeling of being rained upon." -  
E.L. Doctorow*

- Character Worksheet
  - I made up a character worksheet for *Conversations with the Fat Girl*, because I found myself getting locked into archetypes and not really digging to find out who these people really were. I've attached it for you - it helped work out some kinks.  
[DOWNLOAD HERE](#) (.pdf)

- It's a weird thing, but I found cutting out pictures of people in magazines really got me to focus on the character as a whole other being, in and of itself. Because while no character is actually based on a certain person, there are similarities to several types of people in my life. Cutting out a picture of a totally unknown person, and getting my mind to think of that character as that person, severed any ties - once and for all - to anyone in my life. It allowed me to get more real - not be so delicate, if you will.
- If you think of your characters as real people, and you should, then you have to look at your first draft as kind of like your first little coffee date with them at Starbucks one morning. They're really not going to open up about why they hate their family or feel less-than-sometimes. It's purely a fishing expedition that may yield some interesting tid-bits, but in the end your first draft is going to be quite cursory. Each time you edit, it's like another conversation, another round of beers and another layer of delectable confessions.
- Critic's Corner
  - It's an odd tightrope you're going to have to walk. On one hand, you have to know what to weed out as someone's personal preference and what to take in as good advice. The key? Leave your ego at the door and do what's right for the narrative.
  - One of the best comments I ever got was after I'd written the First Draft to *Conversations* - also known as the *Shittiest Draft Ever*. I copied the *Shittiest Draft Ever* and gave it to 10 people, like a book club. We gathered, I gave them the schpiel and we set a date to return. Upon returning, I was ripped a new asshole. The best comment being that they knew they were supposed to hate Olivia (the "villain" in *Conversations*) but they just didn't have enough opportunities. I guess absence is not a very pro-active component in a good villain.
  - And honestly, we know our work better than anyone- we know the weak points. Nothing anyone says is a shock, right? You're just hoping that they'll let you slide...the good advice, the good critic, the good editor, will tell you why it didn't work and then brainstorm with you about how to remedy the situation.
  - After the first go round with a reader, you'll figure out whether or not you want them to read it again, or if it was purely a learning experience. I went from 10+ readers for *Conversations* to 2 for *Seeing Me Naked...* and one's my Mom.

- Find the person who gets you, gets your writing, pushes you to do better, knows how to talk to you without bruising your ego, doesn't compete, doesn't discourage, doesn't gloss over, etc... In the end, it's usually another writer, because they are definitely going to ask you to read their shit, too. Paybacks, I suppose.
  
- Go to Author Readings:
  - This is the best way to learn!
  - I learned so much from just listening and asking questions during the Q and A portions of these events.
  - I remember a big panel of mystery authors at the Los Angeles Festival of Books - someone from the audience asked the question, "How do you know when to stop writing? When the book is over?" To which Donald Westlake, a legend, answered - "when the reader can write the next chapter." That's one of the best pieces of advice I've ever gotten.
  - I also went to see Dennis Lehane at Vroman's and during the Q and A portion of the event this guy kind of went off on Mr. Lehane saying that he didn't really care for his Stand Alones, that he much preferred his series books. Needless to say, it was an uncomfortable moment. But Mr. Lehane was amazing - he answered, "A writer never defends their work. Next question?" Brilliant. Succinct. And I still live by that to this day.
  - It's also a little shout-out to camaraderie - going to these events shows support for your fellow writers. It's a tough sight for anyone to see empty chairs - so put a little in your karmic bank and head out to as many as you can.

In the end, it's about finding that thing you know is there. Inside you, it's the sense that there's something more to you than the drone of your work week. You know there's this perfect existence you're made for - you can feel it. And it's real, you know? The good, the bad and the ugly of writing is still more majestic than seeing the world from the top of Mount Everest.