

DIASPORIC LITERATURE

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Breaking the rules of writing

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As it takes me one to three years to write a book, I want to consider many issues before deciding what to write. The worst scenario I can imagine is to rush into a story and abandon ship after six or twelve months.

I don't want to even think of 'whodunit it' stories and I'm not a romance writer. My heroes fall in love and I chronicle the occasional lovemaking scene but I don't want to fill a book with bed hopping heroes enjoying the delights of the flesh.

My book should be a hero's journey for without heroes nothing changes and the world we live in becomes a depressing place. Reading the lives of the saints fascinated me, I rejoiced every time Ulysses escaped from yet another near death experience and I cried the day Martin Luther King was assassinated but I'm not into biographies of well-known heroes. I want to write about the unsung heroes you and I would chronicle.

Coming to structural matters, I no longer believe the schoolteachers of the world who stipulate that every story has a beginning, middle and an end. The modern readers don't have the time to read three to four chapters before the author introduces them to the main conflict of the story. I introduce the readers to the conflict the hero faces as soon as possible. Then I chronicle the actions she takes to resolve the conflict - the dénouement.

While many argue the beginning of a novel is important, I hold the last chapter of the book is as important. When the reader reaches the end of my book, I would like them to feel happy my hero accepted the challenges of the conflict. It was a good fight. Here I'm not thinking of the outcomes of boxing or wrestling matches or the end of a war because my hero carpet bombed the Dresden of the story. I am interested in the conflicts between generations or the clashes arising from prejudice, fanaticism or jingoism.

My second requirement is emotional connection not so much because emotions sell but because if I don't feel an emotional connection with a story my writing is not authentic.

In what follows I'll only explore stories with which I have an emotional connection. I cannot imagine writing a story that doesn't have a universal theme. And a laundry list of good intentions will not do. This issue is important but what is a universal theme? Given the constraints imposed by this short contribution I'll explore only two important universal themes here.

Many writers declared that we don't live authentic lives - a true universal theme. 'Man is born free;' Rousseau noted, 'and everywhere he is in chains. Politeness requires this thing; decorum that; ceremony has its forms and fashion its laws, and

these we must always follow, never the promptings of our nature.'

In the play Uncle Vanya, Chekhov exposes us to many encores of the same theme. The young beautiful woman of the play, for instance, is in love with the country doctor but she doesn't leave her boring husband because he has a professorship.

T. S. Elliot's Wasteland is a land where everybody is living an inauthentic life. Doing as other do, doing what someone tells us to do. And no one has the courage to strike out and be the captain of his life.

The world started with an act of disobedience, Fromm wrote, and will end with an act of obedience.

With so much theory under our belts, you will now understand the mess I'm in. Maureen and I were hopelessly in love. 'No one else would love you more,' she declared with conviction while we gazed at the first sunrise of this century. And what did I do? Did I propose to her? Did I marry her? No I didn't. I dumped her and married a well-to do woman with whom I have nothing in common! Am I happy? Of course I'm not and I suffer everyday of the week and twice on Sundays when she drags me to church. My ordeal has a beginning but no end because I cringe every time she touches me. I cough whenever I smell the smoke in her hair and I think of Maureen when we make love. Years ago I used to think that suicide was the coward's way out but now I'm convinced it's an honourable escape from my living hell.

Love knows no societal boundaries, is another important universal theme. Did Romeo seduce the lovely Juliet by reciting the poems of Ariosto? No, a hundred times no. We remember the lovers because there was nothing but hatred between their families. It was an amour fou story that blossomed where hatred reigned.

This memorable love story fades into insignificance when we consider amour fou stories in modern settings. Hatred resulting from a feud between two Italian families does not compare with the hatred based on the extermination of thousands of innocent civilians. Here I'm thinking what the Moslem Bosnians suffered in the hands of the Christian Serbs. When I was young I believed that each prayer repeated has a certain value in cleansing away sin. Now we know what Ethnic Cleansing is.

Away from the Balkans let us consider the amour fou between Almaz, a young Palestinian girl and Simon, an Israeli soldier. Almaz's brother was a suicide bomber and Simon killed many Palestinians every time his company raided the Gaza Strip. Love however ignored all this hatred and blossomed.

How did the young lovers fare? If you like sad endings her people stoned Almaz to death because she fraternized with the enemy. And Simon flips when he sees her body covered in bruises and blood. She died, he hears, clutching the medallion he gave her - the Star of David.

If you like happy endings Simon deserted the Army and walked to Jordan with a forged passport. In Amman he meets Almaz who

abandoned her family to be with her beloved. Imagine what the Army or his family thought of Simon. Consider the shame Almaz brought to her family. Fleeing from so much hatred they survived under the protection of the UN for a year before they boarded a plane to Adelaide where they spend the rest of their lives building bridges between the Arabs and the Israelis.

In summary, amour fou stories unite all of us because the heroes ignore the petit bourgeois reasons that divide one family from another, one race from another and the members of one religion from another.

But wait a minute, you'll interrupt. What do we know about Arabs and Israelis? Are we not supposed to write about what we know? You are right but I don't think many readers would want to read about the life and times of my auntie Mabel. She married three times and ended a binge alcoholic but she was no hero.

If we don't know much about the Arabs and the Israelis we can research the topic, talk to Australian-Arabs/-Israelis. This is what writers do!

Jules Verne was a lawyer but he consulted with scientists and artillery engineers, before writing his book *From Here to the Moon*. Michael Ondaatje wrote *The English Patient* after he studied the living history of the era between the two world wars. Michael Frayn is a journalist who sought many free tutorials from nuclear physicists before writing *Copenhagen*. An outstanding play that explored the consequences of a conversation Heisenberg (a German) and Bohr (a Dane) had during the war.

That is what writing is. You forget your auntie Mabel and break the rules because you have a memorable and original story to tell! Literature is in good hands so long as creative writers lean toward disobedience.



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Mining the treasures of clichés

Nov 1, 2009 04:24AM

'I'm a Nazi when I see clichés,' Helen told me the other day. Is she right or should I assume she has a blindspot?

Helen is a long-standing friend with a degree in creative writing under her belt. I admire her in many ways but she can't stand

anyone using clichés.

In many ways she is right because clichés express something that has become overly familiar or commonplace, stale, stereotypical and timeworn. Writers are supposed to be creative, and are expected not to use words that have a timeworn ring to them.

As John Simon notes in *Paradigms Lost*, the *vanity of a peacock* is to imagery what a twenty-times-used blade is to shaving.

I love the twinkle in your eyes, is a tired cliché that is too generic to be useful. It could apply to a cockatoo, for instance.

The trouble is that we use clichés in our conversations. It's natural therefore to allow our characters to use clichés. Moreover the clichés our characters use define their socioeconomic background, their frustrations or exhilarations. Clichés therefore reveal character.

Writing a novel without using clichés would be like describing a world that has no cultural resonances. In a less abstract way our book would be like a beautiful empty house waiting for carpets and pictures. It would have all possibilities. It could become a palace or a brothel.

If there was a way we can use clichés creatively no one could accuse us of not being creative and we would be mining the cultural treasures clichés offer. Is this search a pie in the sky misadventure? Many don't think so.

In passing, and it's only in passing, did you notice how creative Simon was with the title of his book *Paradigms Lost*? (Remember Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*?)

If this example is too literary try the following:

She is the cow in the ointment.

It was lust at first bite.

He is a legend in his soup.

These are clichés that some creative writer tweaked - twichés. Here are some more from reference [1]

A media guru described Madonna's latest diet *Footloose and Fat-Free*.

George W Bush has gone from abject wealth to riches, Jon Stewart quipped.

'A good tweak,' the author of reference [1] writes, 'leads readers one way then jerks them into the delight-giving realm of surprise.'

Is that all we can do to infuse life into timeworn clichés? Many don't think so because creativity knows no bounds.

Tom Skinner for instance wrote a children's book full of clichés [2]. It's fine to be different was the message of Tom's book.

As you can imagine I cannot reproduce all his clichés in this essay but here are three samples that would elate you.

If you are as slow as a tortoise don't worry because the tortoise often beats the hare.

If you are mad as a hatter, the madder the merrier.

If you are an ugly duckling, remember ugly ducklings turn into

beautiful swans.

I'm sure you get the drift of Tom's beautifully illustrated book. Parenthetically it is worth noting that Tom abandoned his boring day job, sold his house, and educated himself to become a great writer. He dedicated his book

To Mum

For the immovable belief that being different was my virtue rather than my millstone.

Thank you Tom and Helen. Nazi or not I owe her a lot for inspiring me to take time off and reflect on the treasures clichés can offer us.

[1] A. Plotnik. *Twist worn expressions into winners*. The Writer. Aug 2006. p15

[2] T. Skinner. *Round fish, square bowl*. 2006. New Frontier Publishing

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Anthropomorphic visions of god

Oct 19, 2009 09:18AM

The more I think of man, the more I love the cows.

Our *Singapore Airlines* flight followed the kangaroo route. In Rome, we headed to the *Umberto Hotel* and rushed to bed after a shower. Being in Helen's arms for twenty hours, I couldn't last any longer. I shouldn't tell you this but I even suggested the obvious during our long flight but all I got from her was, 'I love you when you are that eager.'

As she talked, her almond shaped eyes sparkled and danced under her strait eyebrows.

Tall and slim she always wore fashionable clothes and expensive perfumes. Warm, well proportioned and sensuous she turned heads wherever we went.

There was no doubt she attracted men but Helen related to women too because she ran two boutiques that catered for the upwardly mobile femmes. Whenever we discussed feminist issues she was no dilettante. I loved Betty Friedan but didn't think much of Greer. And that was exactly where she stood in the Feminist Movement. Without trying, I convinced her I knew the issues when I talked about Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary with passion. Everyone we knew thought we were soul mates.

From where I sat however, Helen was a past mistress in getting what she wanted by withholding sexual favours but more of this later.

In the morning we considered our options over coffee and croissants. I suggested Firenze and she wanted to go to Napoli. I couldn't wait to see the home where Nicolo Michiavelli wrote *The Prince* but Helen wanted to see the city where Sophia Loren was born, so we headed to Napoli.

The driver of our tourist coach drove through the streets of Napoli but didn't let us out. When I heard him say it wasn't safe, I imagined the streets were full of pickpockets and assassins. In Pompeii I admired the frescos in the Villa of Mysteries but the cappuccino I had after the tour was vile. In my mind the barista of the café mixed ash with the coffee beans.

Back in Rome I was chirpy because we were one step closer to the City of my dreams. Helen however wanted to spend time in the Sistine Chapel. What is another short detour, I thought and you guessed it, I followed her.

In the Chapel tourists from many countries admired the paintings while I yawned. Bored to tears I kept on looking at my watch while everyone around me was on cloud nine.

Helen was gloomy on the way to our hotel. Was it because it was our last day in the Eternal City? In our hotel room she lashed out.

'How can I love a man who is not moved by those exquisite paintings?' She asked frowning. Fearing a sex embargo was imminent I knew I had to come up with a credible defence but couldn't think of any. To gain time I reached for her hand but she recoiled with the speed of light as if I had leprosy. Her hasty withdrawal made me realize I was in a diabolical strife.

Judging by her mood I was looking at a week's embargo; ten nights perhaps. Under normal circumstances, I would have tolerated an embargo lasting a week but there was nothing normal about what I was experiencing. Convinced the streets of Rome were full of assassins I needed her hugs. Add to this my cappuccino experience in Pompeii and you will understand the mess I was in.

I was going to tell her the icons I saw in the Japanese Christian Churches depicted god as a man who looked decidedly Japanese. A moment's thought however convinced me to change tack. I quickly considered other explanations I dismissed before I arrived at what I thought might work.

'God,' I said using a soft voice 'is not an old man with a long white beard. He is not Italian. He is not Japanese. He is not even a man. God is the force of survival against incredible odds.'

Hearing my confession she didn't rush to my arms but dropped her shoulders. Sensing I was getting some traction, I continued.

'God,' I said with a firm voice, 'is the *élan vital* for all evolution.'

Responding to her request, I clarified.

'The vital force we see around us.' I explained. 'The triumph of life over decay and decomposition.' When she reached for my hand, I decided to go for broke.

'I found the paintings degrading,' I proclaimed with confidence. 'The paintings are insulting. We can't think of god as an old Italian with a long white beard.' Reassured she nodded. Turned around, headed to the bathroom, stripped and went under the shower. As she left the glass door of the cubical open, I joined

her.

In the train to Firenze I had all the time in the world to revisit the Sistine Chapel incident because Helen was talking to Jenny, an American nun in our compartment.

In my reverie, I remembered the words of a bold man.

'If we ask a cow to paint god, the cow will paint a cow.'

Was he right? Of course he wasn't 'cause cows are not that arrogant. No other animal in the world is as conceited as man who thinks god looks like an Old Italian. If I had to choose between men and animals, I'll live with the cows anytime.

Glancing at me, Helen asked, 'What are you dreaming now?' And turning to Jenny she confided, 'that is the look I don't trust.'

While I was trying to find the right words, Helen and Jenny were waiting for my answer.

'I feel an affinity with the animals,' I confessed.

'Tell us something we don't know,' Helen announced sporting a wicked smile. I was ready to protest but Jenny intervened.

'Saint Francis loved the animals too,' she said in a matter of fact voice.

'And mother earth,' I added.

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My last memorable dinner party

Aug 6, 2009 02:30AM

My last memorable dinner party

Most of us know the format of conventional dinner parties. A gracious hostess invites four or five couples to her mansion and after the introductions, over drinks, the guests are ready for the first course of a four-course dinner.

During dinner the hostess encourages her guests to change places so everyone gets the chance to chat to everyone else. In my experience, the women network during the party while the men posture like peacocks to impress. The food is delectable, the wines are well-chosen and the party ends when the last drop of wine is consumed.

My dinner parties have a different format. I hire the Wine Centre and invite one guest only. While we talk and enjoy the foods and wines the Centre provides, we usually think of other guests to invite. I then send a stretch limo to fetch whoever we want and the dinner party continues. On one occasion, I had ten guests and the dinner party lasted till the wee hours of the morning. I usually pick interesting people for my dinner parties and no one ever refused my invitation. I remember the night Darwin sent

one of his sidekicks instead. Her teacher, she said, was busy arguing with God but that didn't impress me. I told her I needed Charles at the Wine Centre ASAP.

'And who do think you are?' She asked.

'I'm the omniscient narrator,' I said and that made all the difference because she too knew that omniscient narrators rule. Last year I invited John Gardener for a dinner that proved to be most memorable. The reason I picked him was simple: my cousin Sophy sends me wonderful poems to read. I read them with the aid of my Thesaurus but can't get into them. I wanted to know why her poems don't hit the spot. You probably remember that John died in a motor accident in 1982 at the age of forty nine. He wrote many novels but he was also a renowned teacher of the Art of Fiction.

Tall and lanky he stepped out of my stretch limousine and I greeted him by shaking both his hands. After the first course he was impressed. You have a nice set up here, he said. The wines are easy to drink and the chef is a learned man.

With the small talk out of the way, I read one of the poems Sophy composed and popped the question.

'You are like all my students,' he said nodding. 'You want answers to specific questions without having any background of what a novel is, or a poem for that matter.'

'I'm in your hands,' I said. 'Fire away.'

'For a start,' he said, after he had another sip of the Merlot, 'I don't make any distinction between poems, short stories or novels. When you pick up a work of fiction to read, you accept an invitation to share a dream with the writer. While you are in this dream-like-state you don't want any interruptions. If you have to stop dreaming to look up a word in the Thesaurus the brake doesn't help.'

'This is exactly how I feel,' I said with a reassuring smile.

'That is not all, because we now need to explore what the role of fiction is. Many hold the role of fiction is to entertain or distract us from our troubles or that it broadens our knowledge of people and places. But for my money the role of fiction is to reinforce the noblest qualities in us, and lead us feeling uneasy about our faults and limitations.'

That is great I thought and ordered another bottle of the Merlot.

'We reach our goal,' he continued 'by recording the hero's journey from the personal to universal experiences.'

'You are a Professor,' I reminded him, 'and use impressing words but can I have some examples?'

'I was in the Cunnamulla cemetery the other day and saw the beautiful inscription Mrs McAlister dedicated to her husband.

The last act of love is remembrance.

Cunnamulla is a small Queensland country town and Mrs McAlister was a loving wife but her inscription speaks volumes to us because it reminds us of a universal theme. I imagine that when she had no more tears to shed, she came up with the inscription that touches everyone's heart. More importantly the inscription has nothing to do with Cunnamulla. A New Yorker can understand it. And it has nothing to do with the McAlister family anymore.

Notice also that Mrs McAlister used everyday words to convey her fine feelings.'

'Can we have more examples, please?'

'The autumn haiku,

Imperceptibly it withers this flower like heart of man,

expresses another universal theme.'

'What you call universal themes, I see as morbid fascination with our destiny.'

'I know your attention span is short, so I have chosen a short inscription and a haiku. Let me expose you to different universal themes. The universal theme of the Sanskrit poem,

Surely the god of love became her willing slave,
Obedient to the orders that her glances gave,

celebrates the power of women. In the next poem, the universal theme is grace and beauty.

The moon tries every month in vain
To paint a picture of your face;
And having failed to catch its grace
Destroys the work, and starts again,

Please note the poets used every day words to convey fine feelings'

'I'm now comfortable with universal themes but can we return to language? If Sophy should not use unusual words to impress me, what is the most effective language weapon a writer has at her disposal?'

'Now that is important. And the answer is a judicious repetition of words.'

'I thought repetition is a no-no.'

'Far from it but it has to be judicious. Consider the title of the book Nietzsche wrote.

Human, all too human.

That is judicious repetition.'

'Fine but I need your help on another important issue. In a story I'm writing, I reminisce about my younger days when I cycled for a couple of hours to meet my girlfriend. I was on a high during the journey and when I saw her wearing tight jeans I couldn't hold back. I abandoned my bike, hugged her and kissed her. So far so good but where is the universal theme?'

'Well,' he said scratching his chin, 'Eros is great. Many believe that life is a pleasant interlude between Eros and Thanatos.'

'Thanatos being?'

'Death,' he replied.

'That is fine,' I said, 'but I want to express a deeper universal theme. Can you help?'

'Of course I can, only you have to promise me that you won't be offended.'

'Fire away.'

'At one level we have an expression of Eros but at another level you are craving for the freedom you once had.'

'What do you mean?'

'You are not free now. You have two mortgages around your neck, your Bankcard is overdrawn by 15,000 dollars and you drive a monstrosity you call a four-wheel car.'

'That is true but where are we going with your observations?'

'You are not free and long for the care free days.'

'And how do you know so much about me?'

'Because I've heard you sing.'

'Can you be more specific?'

'Isn't it true that you sing Born Free while you cruise the streets of Adelaide in your monstrosity?'

'It's true but I can't see the universal theme.'

'The sad truth Niko is, that you lost all your freedoms and you

are now living the miserable life of a consumer. You are surrounded by goodies but you are not happy and you are not free. That is an important universal theme. Many are in the same boat.'

As I said, it was a memorable dinner party.

Nicholas Fourikis

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