Unlocking the Art of Fiction Writing:
8 Keys to Writing Great Fiction
(and Avoiding Dangerous Traps along the Way)

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Introduction

Yes, it is no ordinary human business to say you are going to write a novel. You are planning to create a world. This God-like presumption may be intoxicating, but it can never be comfortable. Nor should it be.

—Norman Mailer

The novel is the affliction for which only the novel is the cure.

—Joyce Carol Oates

Writing a short story or a novel is rarely easy—or comfortable—but the important things rarely are, unless you're overly attached to your La-Z-Boy recliner. (That's not me. I swear. No, really.) It is a complex thing to create a world solely out of letters arranged on a page; you have to convince the letters and words to become invisible, allowing the reader to see through them to the characters and story beyond. And yet, to succeed in this act of invisibility is to feel something quite transcendent: a little bit of the world inside your head can now live inside the heads of others. You have made something, and there is nothing quite like the act of creation.

Invisibility is not easy. There are a thousand tasks in this process, and it requires a bit of a mad alchemist to even try to mix the right solution. But if you're here, you have the desire to embrace this mad chemistry of words and sentences that is fiction writing. You're here because something inside is drawing you—pushing you, cajoling you, commanding you—to put words on the page. And the good thing is that you don't have to be intimidated by the many ingredients or formulas necessary for mixing the solution: focus on the big things and the rest will usually fall into place.

Unlocking the Art of Fiction Writing offers a few successful formulas to help mad alchemists handle the big things. Hopefully, they'll help you write a great story … without burning off your eyebrows. Literary alchemy can be a dangerous business, so it's good to know the dangers ahead (and the ways around them).

Key #1 — Ideas: Digging through damp basements

Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That's because they were able to connect experiences they've had and synthesize new things.

—Steve Jobs

"Where do your ideas come from?" These are the words that so many writers dread hearing.

The question isn't dreaded because the answer is obvious, silly, or pointless, though some writers toss it off as such, seeing in the eyes of the questioner a desire for an easy answer: "Oh, I stop in at Walmart a couple times a week and load up on ideas. You can find them right next to the leaf blowers. Costco is good, too, but the ideas only come in bulk." Some people who ask the question want an easy answer because they hope that ideas are easy; it's as if the answer they expect to receive from the writer will allow them to pluck out a few great ideas—winners, each and every one—as if ideas could somehow be bound by "easy" or "hard" and it's simply a matter of retrieval. No, in some sense, ideas just *are*, just *happen*, as they are part of the mind itself—a facet of the imagination at work on the world we all experience. This is what makes it a good (but a dreaded) question. The genesis of an idea is a complex thing, and its birth is perhaps hard to understand without some personal reflection and a lot of coffee.

Of course, for writers and soon-to-be writers, the question might be better framed as "Where do *successful* ideas come from?" Because that's what we want: an idea that works, propels a story forward, and compels the reader to turn the pages.

Ideas aren't hard to find (or, perhaps, to *allow in*), but people often look for them in the wrong places. The most common of these wrong places, of course, is bestseller lists. Many writers look at bestselling books for ideas, trying to adopt one for themselves. Wizards and witches! Vampire angst! Handcuffs and fine ties! The thing is, ideas aren't usually successful because of some objective value. They aren't transferable gift cards. Each successful idea is successful because of what it meant to one writer. Each successful idea is successful because of how one writer transformed it into a living story. A story idea is an inherently subjective thing: it lives in the heart and fingers of a single writer. Hand it off to someone else, and it inevitably becomes a different idea (or a mere imitation).

Horror novelist Stephen King, a perennial on the bestseller lists, says,

> When I'm asked why I decided to write the sort of things I do write, I always think the question is more revealing than any answer I could possibly give. Wrapped within it, like the chewy stuff in the center of a Tootsie Pop, is the assumption that the writer controls the material instead of the other way around. The writer who is serious and committed is incapable of sizing up story material the way an investor might size up various stock offerings, picking out the ones which seem likely to provide a good return.

Ideas are interior things, built out of personal beliefs and dreams and whims, and they are adorned with bits of life from the exterior world that have been filtered through the writer's unique consciousness. In a sense, ideas arise and choose themselves; it is usually the ideas that compel the writers rather than the writers who compel the ideas.

A successful idea needs a certain density and weight; put in motion, it must create enough momentum to carry the writer through the writing of the story. In the case of a novel, this is a lot of momentum. It is not purely about speed, for a novel can be written feverishly in a few months (or even weeks) or dragged out over years. Either way, the idea must have force—the idea must be strong enough to compel the writer to place word after word, sentence after sentence, and page after page. A borrowed idea—plucked from the bestseller list, let's say—will likely not have enough momentum. A borrowed idea will be a bit like that boulder Sisyphus was doomed to push up the hill for eternity. Thoughts of money, acclaim, and bestsellerdom are, in truth, quite weak forces. A story can be difficult: it will require time and sacrifice, and borrowed ideas driven by shallow motivations tend to have little creative force. The momentum fades and the boulder grows heavier and heavier. The bottom of the hill will start to look better and better. Let the boulder go, watch it roll away—those typed pages vanishing from your hard drive—and then go grab a Gatorade and rehydrate. Try that boulder again … go ahead. But it will be even heavier this time.

The truth is, a successful idea is a personal idea. We don't always like to interrogate the personal—to crack open our own ideas and creative processes—but Terry Brooks, the bestselling author of the *Shannara* series, suggests that doing so is important:

> Where we get our ideas is at the heart of how we work and what we do. Trying to explain in rational, analytical fashion how we come up with our plots and our thematic structures threatens in an odd sort of way to reveal that we are all just humbugs hiding behind a velvet curtain. Better to let it all remain a mystery. Better to keep what little we can explain to ourselves.
>
> All well and good, except that taking this tack suggests we are cowards, and the word *cowardly* might work once in a while for lions, but it is bad news for writers.

In truth, many writers fear this loss of mystery, as if an idea, the act of creation itself, is somehow magical. Perhaps writers don't want readers to see their sweat, their work; they just want the magic, and they don't want anyone to peer behind the wizard's curtain. We have this idea that genius should be easy, but the first rule of genius is that it is always harder than it looks.

If we are writers talking to writers, though, we don't need to be cowardly. We don't even need to be lions; we just need to be honest. And the honest truth is that successful ideas are personal. They are born out of the things you do and see and feel and know.

Yes, they come out of what you know and what you want to know. Since we're already tackling the classic question "Where do your ideas come from?" we might as well knock on the door of that old maxim "Write what you know." This is true, to a degree, but it is often misread and misunderstood. People too often take this saying in a literal, factual way: if you're a postal worker, you're doomed to write stories about postal codes and dogs. This may not be particularly inspiring. But *what you know* is not referring to facts. Facts are objective things. They can be researched and learned. Learning facts is

simply a matter of effort and application, and this should never slow a writer down. No, *what you know* is talking about you. It *is* you. It is the things you know in your heart and head and bones and blood. It is what you have felt and experienced; it is all those things that you've dreamed and doodled and dreaded.

Betsy Lerner, an author and literary agent, says, "It never fails to surprise me, in conversations with writers who seek my advice as to what they should write, how many fail to see before their very eyes the hay that might be gold. Instead of honoring the subjects and forms that invade their dreams and diaries, they concoct some ideas about what's selling or what agents and editors are looking for as they try to fit their odd-shaped pegs into someone else's hole." Indeed, Lerner says, "Most writers have very little choice in what they write about. What is in evidence over and over is a certain set of obsessions, a certain vocabulary, a way of approaching the page."

Your ideas, and your way of expressing them, must be uniquely you. Joyce Carol Oates, recipient of the National Book Award, suggests that "Your 'forbidden' passions are likely to be the fuel for your writing" and that you should "Never be ashamed of your subject, and of your passion for your subject." You have to embrace your own fears and passions and obsessions, your own faults and failures and conflicts. You do not simply know about postal codes and dogs; you know about the cities and houses you've lived in, and you know about families and friends, love and pain, and fear and loneliness. You know about wants and needs. You know about broken things and reborn things. You know a million things.

These are the things that need to live in your story. These are the things that need to be explored and felt. And yes, feel free to throw in some postal codes and dogs, too, but remember that you cannot blast the reader with your knowledge: readers do not want a history fact sheet, a technical manual, or a sermon. You should definitely avoid preaching at a reader. Stephen King says, "What you need to remember is that there's a difference between lecturing about what you know and using it to enrich the story. The latter is good. The former is not."

The trick is exploring the things you know and seeing them clearly. You have to see and use your own truths. If teen angst means little to you, then trying to use it as the basis for a vampire novel will not work. Is this a passion? Is this something you must explore? Will this have the momentum needed to carry you through the story? Not just the imagined story in your head but the slow story … the one you type out letter by letter on the page. What are your own conflicts? Because these are the conflicts that will likely live in your stories. Your ideas should thrum with the electricity of your own conflicts and fears, your own passions and loves.

Indeed, your ideas are often born of these things. They are composites: amalgamations of what you think and feel and see. Story ideas are often born from the collision between smaller ideas, between images and thoughts and feelings. An image of an owl, memories of school, a love of magic, and the feeling of being lonely—of feeling orphaned—could perhaps collide and give birth to an idea about a school of wizardry and witchcraft hidden away from the Muggles all around. An idea is born, and as it draws in other ideas, it grows larger and larger; the greater its mass, the greater its gravity will be, and the greater its gravity, the more ideas it will pull in … and the greater its momentum.

Terry Brooks says that you get your ideas from "asking questions and thinking about the answers. From considering possibilities and wondering to what they might lead. From letting your mind run free and taking a close look at whatever it happens to stumble across. It isn't thinking so much as it is dreaming. But all things begin with dreaming." Your ideas will come to you if you stay open to them and take a

little time to dream and reflect. Let the little ideas collide. Let them pinball off each other, casting off sparks. Find the ideas that stick together. Dream a little on this stuck-together idea, and start the boulder rolling.

Lerner says that "If you are struggling with what you should be writing, look at your scraps. Encoded there are the themes and subjects that you should be grappling with as a writer." Indeed, look at your life. Your ideas could very well be scattered around your room, draped over the arm of the couch, or tucked neatly into your drawers. Look at your garbage, your books, and your pots and pans; look at your spice rack, and look in those old boxes in the damp storage room in the basement.

Stephen King says it straight:

> Write what you like, then imbue it with life and make it unique by blending in your own personal knowledge of life, friendship, relationships, sex, and work. Especially work. People love to read about work. God knows why, but they do. If you're a plumber who enjoys science fiction, you might well consider a novel about a plumber aboard a spaceship or on an alien planet.

And throw in a daughter's conflict between duty and freedom, if that's what you know. Or a jet propulsion system. Or space monkeys. (You can never go wrong with space monkeys.)

So … what do you know? Start there. And then dream a little.

Key #2 — Failure is much better than you think it is

The artist, perhaps more than most people, inhabits failure, degrees of failure and accommodation and compromise, but the terms of his failure are generally secret.

—Joyce Carol Oates

But if you can't give it up, if hearing how impossible the odds are only makes you dig in deeper, it doesn't really matter if you've got natural talent. Your job is to marshal the talent you do have and find people who believe in your work. What's important, finally, is that you create, and that those creations define for you what matters most, that which cannot be extinguished even in the face of silence, solitude, and rejection.

—Betsy Lerner

There are two ways to measure a story: The first is by reading it. (Let's keep it simple: if the story works for at least one reader, we can call this literary success, whether big or small.) The second is by checking whether it was published, how many copies were sold, and how much money was made. (This, of course, is material success.) The thing is, a writer usually has a say only in the first of these, crafting the words to the best of his or her ability, shaping the story that will be read. The second often has little to do with the writer, except as a corollary of the first: if you write a good story, the odds of material success are probably greater than if you write a bad story. But the thing is, you can't write for the second—you can't write for publication, sales, and money. You have to write for readers. It's the readers who give you sales and money. Betsy Lerner says that the two should not be confused:

> Certainly, the desire for success and the fear of failure run along a continuum. And the extent to which either motivates or paralyzes a given artist is dependent on a great many factors, including ability, ego, desire, and drive. But it's important to remember that success and failure are only part of the equation. The making of art and the selling of it are two entirely distinct enterprises.

It's a simple thing, but it's important to remember: you write for the reader. You won't succeed for every reader, the same way you won't succeed with every story, every sentence, and every word. And this is okay. Failure is a part of the process. Remember that you have to write a good story first. There will be lots of failure here, surely, but this is inherent in the act of writing. Fail enough (choosing the wrong words until you choose the right ones) and you might succeed. Succeed, and your story will live on inside the reader. But remember that the reader always comes before the sale.

When you first start out, you might read what you've written and decide there's no trash can slimy enough to deserve your crumpled draft. Lynching, beheading, and burning may be necessary. There's good news and there's bad news about this feeling. The good news is that you have good taste. The bad news is that your ability has not yet caught up with your taste. And this might seem like really bad news,

but it's not. If you write a bad story and think it's wonderful, it's going to be very hard to write a good story. But if you write a bad story and think it's a bad story, well, you've got a chance.

Why? Because it's your taste that will guide you to a good story. Your taste has grown out of all the stories you've read, all the characters you've adopted as family members (whether loved or hated), and all the sentences you've tasted and savored. It's your taste—this ingrown knowledge—that will tell you when something works and when it doesn't. You can't write a good story if you can't recognize one.

Your first rejections will come from you. Your own head and heart will likely write your first rejection slips. Hopefully, they'll add on a few kind words at the end of each slip to motivate you: *There are some interesting elements here, so please feel free to submit again in the future.*

According to Lerner,

> The serious writer understands that her craft may take years to develop. Not getting into an MFA program, not getting your work in a literary magazine, not getting an agent can be interpreted in a number of ways depending on the writer's ego. For some, it's a referendum on their entire career and future. In response, they rail against those who have slammed the door in their face; others, believing themselves unworthy, take their marbles and go home. It takes a certain kind of person to understand and cope with rejection as an appraisal instead of a judgment. Being able to tolerate the many disappointments and rejections is critical to a writer's survival.

Writing is not easy. There will be little failures (from word to word) and big failures (from story to story), but there is joy in the process—in the steps of learning—as your ability draws closer to your taste. Joyce Carol Oates says that "Success is distant and illusory, failure one's loyal companion, one's stimulus for imagining that the next book will be better, for, otherwise, why write?" Writing stories is an open-ended pursuit: there is no final answer, no final computation or algorithm, just an oft repeated *Solve for x if x = success, y = your last draft, and z = rubbish*. There is always a new story, a new idea chasing your own taste and dreams.

A story itself is written in stages; it is written in drafts and revisions and rewrites. National bestseller Anne Lamott says that the best news you can give yourself is that it is okay to write a shitty first draft:

> All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. People tend to look at successful writers, writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not *one* of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much.

Yes, this means there is work involved. You have to shovel the shit, so to speak. Don't worry, the first draft doesn't actually smell, nor does it soil the hands (though it may offend your sense of taste … which,

of course, is good). But to get to that good second draft and terrific third draft, you have to write that shitty first draft. To write well takes work. "If you want to be a writer," Stephen King says, "you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut. … Every book you read has its own lesson or lessons, and quite often the bad books have more to teach than the good ones." You have to keep your brain open as you read. You do not have to break each story down in textbook fashion, if you're not so inclined. I do not want to suck the joy out of reading. Reading is the lifeblood of the writer. But a part of your brain can remain peeled open, letting aspects of the story in through the skylight. In this strange back attic of the brain, the elements of the story will dance and play and rearrange themselves, legs kicking, doing a little do-si-do. For dance partners, they will pick the other stories you have read and stored up in this attic among the dusty curtains and the old steamer trunk. This part of your mind will be thinking and learning playfully.

Indeed, as King says, "The more you read, the less apt you are to make a fool of yourself with your pen or word processor." No one really wants to be a fool, unless he or she has a penchant for hats with bells and bangles and loves to sing "Hail to the Queen" at all opportunities.

So you read. And you write as much as possible. Yes, this is work, but this is also joy. This is work with a meaning; this is the emergence of your talent. And, as King says, the good news is that "Talent renders the whole idea of rehearsal meaningless; when you find something at which you are talented, you do it (whatever *it* is) until your fingers bleed or your eyes are ready to fall out of your head. Even when no one is listening (or reading, or watching), every outing is a bravura performance, because you as the creator are happy. Perhaps even ecstatic."

This is the gift of such creative work, but first you have to start. You have to do it, to write, "to string words together like beads to tell a story," as Anne Lamott says, as "You are desperate to communicate, to edify or entertain, to preserve moments of grace or joy or transcendence, to make real or imagined events come alive. But you cannot will this to happen. It is a matter of persistence and faith and hard work. So you might as well just go ahead and get started."

It is okay to doubt, to worry, and to feel unequal to the task. Indeed, this may be a necessary part of what drives a writer: to write something new and better … to write something equal to his or her own good taste and own ideal style. Doubting is fine as long as you write. Michael Cunningham, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, says, "I sometimes think that I'm just one of the people who comes here every day and does it, even though I don't feel like it, even though it's difficult and I feel stupid and brain-dead and unequal to the task. … I think a certain fearlessness in the face of your own ineptitude is a useful tool."