University of Victoria, British Columbia

Jack Hodgins

Beyond A Passion for Narrative

Several years ago I was invited to do a reading tour of the Yukon, one of Canada's territories in the far north. On one of the days I was flown in a little plane over the frozen white hills and the herds of migrating caribou, until we landed on a little gravel strip in the middle of nowhere where a fellow in a pickup truck was waiting for me. He drove me still farther north up winding gravel roads, where the snow got deeper and the trees got smaller, telling me the type of scary story that northerners like to tell southerners when they get them trapped. 'Right over there is where old John Smith froze to death last week, sitting in the ditch with a beer bottle in his hand.' As we got closer to the little mining village he said, 'I don't want you to be disappointed if not too many people come to your reading. It's the middle of the day and all the miners are down the mine. But I can promise you one person in your audience. It's in the library and I told the librarian she HAD to stay!' Well, when we got to the library, not only had the librarian not stayed, she'd locked up the library and disappeared. We had to chase all over the little village for a key. When we came back to the library, my audience had arrived and was waiting on the step. It was, indeed, one person - the Anglican priest, dressed in full regalia, as though for a wedding or funeral. We stood around and talked for a while, pretending others would come, until I said, 'Let's go do this thing, I've got a plane to catch.' As soon as we'd got inside, the office phone rang and the truck driver answered it - and I never saw him again. Inside the library, someone had set out about 35 BIG armchairs. The minister sat in the middle of the front row, trying to look big. Just as I opened my book to start reading to him, a wide smile spread across his lips. 'Now you know what it's like to be me every Sunday morning in this place!'

I think of that preacher quite often. It seems to me he has a good deal in common with the writer. Nobody asked us to do this thing we do. And there's certainly no guarantee that anyone will be interested in what we have to offer.

He has much in common with the teacher of writing, as well - a certain presumptuousness that is inevitably tempered with a dose of humiliation every once in a while. A certain foolishness, too, if Gore Vidal is right and the act of teaching writing has ruined more writers even than booze.

And of course, he has much in common with the writer who not only teaches writing but has the audacity to write a textbook on writing. It is as if that priest had, in the madness of his isolation, unilaterally declared himself Bishop of the Klondike and started training *others* to follow his lonely path!

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There are plenty of reasons NOT to do it, of course. Writing a textbook, I mean.

- Teaching colleagues may sneer: 'What makes him think HE's the one to do it?' Fellow writers may sneer: 'Just proves he's more of an academic than a REAL writer,' though some will condemn you for spoiling the myth that all REAL writers are natural-born geniuses who don't NEED to understand what they're doing. Students may read your published work in order to find proof that you don't always practise what you preach. And fans of your fiction may feel betrayed to discover that your books did not arrive, fully formed on 'official heaven-produced paper' lowered from the clouds.

- For a citizen of Canada there is that most Canadian of put-down phrases singing at the back of your brain: 'Who do you think you ARE?' - that voice from home wondering if you'd

forgotten yourself, had possibly got too big for your britches.

- There is the knowledge, as well, that a number of good texts already exist out there: Janet Burroway's, John Gardner's, Kate Grenville's, David Madden's. You could be adding just one more book to the long shelves of the merely competent.

- There is the sneaking suspicion that a text on writing may *appear* to be more useful than it actually is. As the great writing teacher R.H.W. Dillard reminds us, 'imaginative work, artistic work, is essentially *conjunctive*. It is a drawing together of unlikely things… Theory and analytical work, on the other hand, are *disjunctions*. It's all a matter of taking things apart.' Is it even *possible* to produce a writing text that sees writing from the inside, so to speak, rather than from the outsider view of the analyst?

- There is the possibility that the book may fall into the hands of a reluctant, untrained, or incompetent teacher who will force students to memorize it, chapter by chapter, presenting its suggestions as if they were rules, so that in the end you will have done more damage than good.

- There is the risk, of course, that you may put yourself out of business. Forever after, for everything you say to a class there'll be some student ready to shout back, 'I already read that in your book! Tell us something new!' Unless you retire, publishing a text means having to get busy and learn something you didn't know before.

- And then there is the terrifying possibility that you will write a text that someone, fifty years from now, will find in a library and consider an object of ridicule, as some of my students have done with a 1950's text they came across. Amongst other advice, this book offered a list of absolute taboos for the writer of fiction. Here are a few of them.

Do not write about deaths of likable characters, [about] funerals, serious illnesses, the morbid and gruesome, prostitutes, drug addicts, insane persons, drunkards, sordid characters in general!

Keep away from subjects on which public opinion is sharply divided.

Don't write stories about marriages between - or the intermixing of - races.

Do not make the citizen of a friendly nation a villain.

Never include detailed descriptions of excessive suffering.

Never let the villain triumph in the end.

Never speak of motherhood slightingly or with levity.

Never suggest in your stories that there is anything wrong with Big Business - because magazines are supported by their advertisers.

Don't ridicule people in authority.

Don't write about sexual perversion or a too realistic presentation of sex, as these are subjects from which most readers shrink in disgust.

And,

> Always ... 'Always!' … choose heroes who are American [!].

I suppose some people thought these taboos appropriate advice for writers seeking publication at the time of the book's writing, but all these years later the book is left to stand on its own without context, and the book's AUTHOR is seen by my students as a dispenser of ludicrous advice. Would any of us deliberately choose to produce a book that could invite such ridicule in the future?

Well, I knew all those dangers and had absolutely no intention of writing a guide book for fiction writers.

Over the years, however, I photocopied an alarming number of handouts for workshops in Ottawa, Saskatchewan, Vancouver, and Europe, as well as at the University of Victoria. This is partly because I feel more comfortable if my

students have something besides me to look at. It is also because I believe nothing is entirely *real* enough to be remembered unless it is recorded in black and white. And it is, as well, because I believe that neither the workshop nor the lecture, alone, is an entirely adequate approach to becoming a better writer. The more learning approaches we can make use of, the better!

One summer my editor, recently promoted to publisher, was on a visit to the west coast and offered to speak to a class I was teaching at the time. When he saw me take a pile of handouts from my briefcase he demanded to see them. Diagrams and explanations about the points of view, I think it might have been that day, with examples of each. 'Jack, this is great!' he said. 'Do you do this all the time? Let's publish a book!'

'Not a chance,' I said. 'I'm not going to be one of those writers who write books on how to write books.'

Of course I was thinking how awful it would be to receive more praise for your textbook than for your fiction! (How terrible to be introduced, one day, to foreign audiences as the author of a textbook rather than as a novelist!)

It's bad enough that ignorant people say writing cannot be taught.

It's worse that people who don't know any better say: 'Those who can, do, and those who can't, teach.'

I don't even want to imagine what they say about writers who not only teach but teach writing, and not only teach writing but write a book that sets out to teach something *about* writing!

Still, the day came when I got fed up with standing over the photocopy machine, and decided to make a package of all the year's handouts at once, have it printed up by the university print shop, and sold (for a few dollars) to my students.

Of course I couldn't resist sending a copy to my editor - who read it, phoned me, said, 'I want to publish this. The time is right. This country's crawling with would-be writers - most of them bad - nobody knows this better than I do. You'll make a fortune out of this book.'

'Well,' I said - considering, a little sheepishly, the possibility that a fortune earned from a book that taught writing might actually make it possible for me to QUIT teaching writing!

'Well,' I said, drawing my principles close around me. 'Not until I've revised it.'

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It was 12 years after my editor's suggestion before I felt the book was ready for publication. Revised, the 100 handout pages had grown to more than three hundred.

As a novelist, of course, my instincts were to create an entire world within the book, to tell a well-shaped story and tell it all. I donned one of my narrator masks and chatted, so to speak, with the reader. As a teacher, on the other hand, my intention was not - as someone has suggested - to put all other teachers out of business, but to be as consistent as possible with the principles I take with me into the classroom.

> (a) It was important, for instance, to make sure that I didn't sound as if I were delivering the last word on anything, but rather that I was raising questions while presenting methods some successful writers have used - standing back, that is, to let the works and their writers say most of what needed to be said for me.
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> (b) Because so many of the texts already out there take their examples from US writers alone (as if they were the only examples in modern literature worth emulating) I wanted to include examples from the literature of my own country as well as from the other countries whose fiction I read and most admired - like Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland, as well as the US. I wanted student writers who already knew about the skills of Raymond Carver and Eudora Welty to discover the remarkable skills of David Malouf, for instance, as well as John McGahern, Alice Munro, and Maurice Shadbolt.
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> (c) Since learning to write requires DOING it, I wanted to encourage writing rather than just the pleasurable thinking and dreaming about writing, so I included a series of exercises intended to give the writer practice in as many aspects of writing as possible.
>
> (d) I wanted to avoid giving the impression that the writer needed to master all this stuff before starting to write, since I know only too well that the fear of having to know it all is

likely to bring on paralysis.

(e) I wanted to stress the importance of READING good work and imagining how it had come about, and so wished to include good examples as well as reading lists.

(f) And, since different people learn best in different ways, I wanted this book to be not only a companion to the workshop student but equally useful to the writer who doesn't go anywhere near a workshop, who learns on his own out in some shack in the bush, perhaps, or who has chosen to make herself into a writer by taking a lot of English classes.

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And what have people done with the text since its publication? How do they use it?

Informal groups have written to brag that they've done all the exercises, and discussed the results at their meetings -- but have not, thank goodness, asked me to mark them. A few famous writers have confessed that they've read the book secretly, but asked me not to tell anyone. A high school English teacher in Ottawa announced that one of his students had ‘done everything you suggested’ - whatever that means - and had won a provincial prize for her story.

To my horror, one student who had moved several times from one university to another across the country told me that he'd been assigned the book three times by three different instructors. He knew it, he thought, better than I did. He sat in class with a copy nearby, and every once in a while, after something I'd said, a frown would come over his face and he'd reach for the book and start thumbing through it in search of proof that I'd just contradicted myself.

My publisher, flush with excitement over the sales figures, had his own plans for the book. Shamelessly, he contacted every publisher in the country, commiserated with them on the anguish of trying to find something to say in the hundreds of rejection letters they have to write every week, and offered them free copies of *A Passion for Narrative* if they would recommend it to all the writers they rejected. Astonishingly, most publishers took him up on it! Which means, I imagine, that at any given moment some would-be writer somewhere in the second largest country in the world could very well be cursing the day I was born! I can't help but wonder if the day will come when people will measure their failure not by the size of their collection of rejection letters but by the number of copies of *A Passion for Narrative* they've been given.

To make sure of this, a major bookstore chain that sponsors a ‘First novel’ competition bought up hundreds of copies to send out to all the losers. I've asked them not to do this again, since I've estimated that by now there must be at least two copies in every household of the country.

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Though I tried to put everything I've ever discovered or thought about writing fiction into the book, there are aspects of it I intend to improve when I prepare a new edition later this year. Still, it will remain primarily a guide to exploring the SKILLS and TECHNIQUES fiction writers need to practise in order to solve the problems they face while writing.

In case there aren't already enough doubts to keep us uneasy about what we're doing with our lives, this question needs to be asked: Should university writing classes be concentrating primarily on skills and techniques? Are writing programs more suited to trade schools, perhaps, or schools based upon the conservatory model, or IS there an aspect of learning to write that is more appropriate to the expectations of a university than is immediately apparent? And is it possible for a text to be of any help?

It is true that without the skills, matters of theory and innovative thinking may be pointless; yet one of the purposes of a university is to help people develop the capacity for original thought, and this should certainly be as true for the writing student as for the historian, say, or the archeologist.

At the moment I'm thinking about a possible companion book to *A Passion for Narrative*, meant for more advanced writing students, and involving a series of investigations into important questions the writer needs to confront. This book will probably take the form of an anthology of annotated essays and interviews by writers themselves, addressing questions of genesis, choice, tradition, presentation, purpose, and responsibility.

For instance, for

> 1) Questions of GENESIS (or, what some fiction writers think about the origins of their work)
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> …we might look to Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe's book of interviews with Australian writers, *Making Stories*, to compare what Peter Carey, Helen Garner, Jessica Anderson and others have to say about how certain of their novels began. From Jessica Anderson we learn that it's possible to start out researching one novel and end up writing quite another. Peter Carey says that he simply follows the river of an idea at his typewriter. He starts at the beginning and bashes through a draft until he collapses or runs out of steam, then starts all over again at the beginning with a new draft, pushing on still farther. You get the impression that Helen Garner, on the other hand, keeps a notebook of everything she sees, thinks, or does until she's accumulated enough for what she imagines will make a book, and organizes the book out of 3x5 colour-coded cards before she sits down to 'write' it.

For

> 2) Questions of CHOICE (or, what some fiction writers consider while planning a work, making decisions about genre, form, and structure)

…journals kept by writers like Steinbeck and Dostoyevsky allow us to see how different writers make the decisions they are confronted with while planning and writing a novel.

After reading and talking about Reynolds Price's beautiful first novel *A Long and Happy Life* and then the journal he kept while planning it, my students this past term had no difficulty telling me how they felt about it. Reading this journal reminded them that it's okay to change your mind. They found the journal reassuring, since it records his doubts, shows him reading other novels for techniques and solutions to his problems. It acted as a reinforcement of what they have learned on their own, gave them a sense of a common process, and impressed them with the author's excitement about what he's doing. It showed him learning from the other arts, and demonstrated how much of writing can be actually trial and error. It also allowed them to see how Price seems to DISCOVER his characters rather than CREATE them. They felt that this combination of novel, discussion, and journal was one of the most valuable experiences of the term.

One student raised the possibility that something might be learned from reading a journal kept by a writer of a novel that was a big flop. I suspect that he may be right, but I'm not sure how I could put my hands on the journal of a failed novel, even less how I might get the author's permission to use it!

The third topic confronted by this work-in-gestation might be

> 3) Questions of TRADITION (or, what some writers think are the reasons for including or excluding traditional elements of fiction).

Eudory Welty is superb on the important role of setting, for instance, in a way that goes far beyond seeing it merely as one more basic element we should learn how to handle. In her essay 'On Place in Fiction' included in *The Eye of the Story*, she makes an elegant and convincing case for regarding setting, though one of the lesser elements in fiction, as one that informs every other aspect of the piece. Beside this, one could put any number of recent writers insisting on the irrelevance and obsolescence of the very idea of setting, of character, of plot, or just about anything else in fiction -- William Gass's contempt, for instance, for the notion of characters as 'people' rather than, in his words, 'a noise, a proper name, a complex system of ideas, a controlling conception, an instrument of verbal organization, a pretended mode of referring, and a source of verbal energy.'

To approach

> 4) Questions of PRESENTATION (or, what some writers think about shaping a piece of fiction for the reader)

…aside from published opinions on this subject, this book might include samples from a specific novel's series of early drafts, especially if one can be found that has plenty of author scribble in the margins to demonstrate how the successful writer makes choices that move the work closer to some desired goal. The National Library of Canada has collections in the archives, available for such use, and no doubt the National Library of Australia does as well.

And there is John Kuehl's excellent book *Creative Writing and Rewriting*, in which he shows us passages from several drafts by writers like F Scott Fitzgerald, Kay Boyle, and Wright Morris, and discusses the differences the writer has made to each draft - explaining how and why.

As for

5) Questions of PURPOSE and RESPONSIBILITY (or, what some writers think about the moral role of the novelist)

...Carlos Fuentes, Milan Kundera, and Walker Percy write wisely on the purposes of fiction, though their visions are very different from one another - Percy, a physician, sees the novelist as a diagnostician holding his stethoscope to the heartbeat of the world, while Kundera says the purpose of every novel is to say to the reader, 'Things are not as simple as you think.' And Carlos Fuentes says that 'Art brings truth to the lies of history.'

Consider the public debate (available in essays) between William Gass and John Gardner on the morality of fiction writing. Should the writer be aware of the models his work presents and make sure to provide only those worth emulating? Or, is it true, as the title of one of Gass's essays insists, that 'Beauty Knows Nothing of Goodness?'

Perhaps

6) A sixth section should be titled CHALLENGING THE WISDOM OF THE AGES, or WHO SEZ?

How does 'Show don't tell' look in the face of Nobel Prizes won by Jose Saramago and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who are nothing if not TELLERS? Perhaps the advice should be reworded as 'Show *even* while you're telling?' In this chapter we could also consider Charles Baxter's intelligent attack on the abiding tyranny of James Joyce's epiphany. 'I can say with some certainty that most of my own large-scale insights have turned out to be completely false,' he writes. 'They have arrived with a powerful, soul-altering force; and they have all been dead wrong.' He insists that stories can arrive somewhere interesting without claiming any wisdom or clarification, without, really, claiming much of anything beyond their wish to follow a train of interesting events to a conclusion. 'Officials and official culture are full of epiphanies and insights and dogmas. One is free to be sick of that mode of discourse.'

I know the dictum 'Write about what you know' wouldn't stand up to examination for long enough to create an interesting battle, but it does cause fairly strong feelings. I've still not quite recovered from a visit Nobel laureate William Golding made to our department. When a student innocently started a question with 'You know how we're sometimes told to write about what we know …' he reared back and shouted: WHO TOLD YOU THAT? IS THE IDIOT IN THIS ROOM? And then, after long silence, went on to convince us that not once had he written a novel about something he'd previously known anything about.

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Well, I've made a small start on this companion book, with the aid of an energetic and imaginative student assistant. Still, even what I have just described will not accomplish all I would wish. While it may be desirable to move beyond the necessary skills to the examination of certain questions important for writers to confront, this book still addresses only half the writer. And I'm not sure the university OR the conventional textbook is equipped to take the further step.

I was speaking recently with a successful composer who is convinced that the 'conservatories' did a much better job of teaching students of composition than the music departments of universities - that is, until they started to imitate the universities. Conservatories traditionally prepared composers to listen to themselves and the sounds they made, he explained, while the music departments of universities prepare composers to listen to the past, the theorist, the instructor, but seldom themselves or their music. Amongst twentieth-century composers, he suggested, many of those who had been trained in universities tend to remain in universities where they produce little that is original and much that reinforces theory and tradition (examples of what they teach) - and of course pass on this approach to new generations of composers - while those trained in conservatories have tended to produce the more interesting, original, and in his estimation courageous music - from listening not only to the theorists but to the music itself. As a pianist, he said, he taught himself to 'listen to the walls' rather than to the piano, in order to separate himself from the conscious physical activity of his brain and fingers and to hear what he was doing. He swears that this sort of activity was essential for him to learn eventually how to find and to trust his intuitions and instincts as a creator! One of the most frequently asked questions by a composition student after writing about three minutes of music is, he says, 'What do I do next?' His answer is, 'Listen to the music you've written, let it tell you where it wants to go next' - an answer apparently considered heretical and just plain stupid by some academics. In the instrument of his mind, he insists that both valves - the intellectual and the instinctual - be open all of the time.

This is similar to a statement by the novelist and writing teacher Clarence Major, that 'You do your best work when you [just] let it happen, when you find a way to listen to yourself, to let that true self give expression to itself.... You DO have to make an early conscious effort at the same time in order to get to that truth. There is ALWAYS the engagement of consciousness…. You learn how to ride a bicycle, to keep the two wheels going - but then you need to let it happen in a natural way. That may not be the best metaphor…but I think it pretty much says what the creative

process needs. It needs spontaneity and naturalness. If you're dancing, for example, and you're self conscious and look at your feet, you're going to lose your rhythm and get out of step.'

How far to carry the music or bicycle comparison into the teaching of writing I'm not sure, but it is a reminder of how important it is, for the teacher of writing as well as the creator of the writing textbook, to remember that neither learning the skills nor thinking about the 'big questions' is the whole of it, and that spontaneity, instinct, intuition, and the unconscious mind have much to do with creativity or excellence in writing. We want to avoid giving the impression that learning to write is like learning to be a good carpenter constructing buildings according to someone else's plans, or even to be a good editor of your own work, however important that might be. As Madison Smartt Bell has written, 'Within the mind of every imaginative writer, reason vies with intuition, the left brain will struggle to dominate the right (and vice versa)…. One of the writer's projects is always to try, somehow, to turn this engagement into less of a battle, more of a partnership.' (*Narrative Design*, p 368)

So how do we teach writing students to 'listen to the walls' in order to learn how to find and then to trust their instincts, intuitions, and the work itself? Perhaps some of us are trying to do this in workshops, but in workshops students are more likely to learn to listen to one another than to any inner voice. This isn't likely to be done in lecture courses, so far as I know, and is not addressed in any texts that I have seen. It may require the invention of something new. Or, it may require resurrecting the method used by the late W.O.Mitchell in his classes at the Banff School of Fine Arts in the Rocky Mountains. He called it 'Mitchell's Messy Method,' or sometimes 'free-fall,' and so far as I could figure out it was essentially automatic writing. Students were expected to stay in their rooms all day and night, except for meals, writing nonstop, whatever came to mind, without any preconceived purpose. They listened to themselves, or to the walls, ignoring the herds of magnificent and, during the rutting season, dangerous elk grazing outside their windows, and they WROTE. At the end of several weeks they were supposed to have uncovered the topics and scenes and memories and obsessions that could tell them what they ought to be writing about, and possibly how. They may also, along the way, have developed or found a voice.

Some in universities sneered at this approach. I was tempted to become a sneerer myself for a while, when one of Mitchell's students came to my workshop with a wooden apple crate filled with 75 folders, each containing a different day's crop of free-fall. 'Mitchell's messy method helped me find my material,' he said. 'Now you're going to help me turn them all into stories I can publish!'

Aside from a lot of 'free-fall' writing, I suspect the task of developing that instinct, that intuitive consciousness, requires more than anything else a good deal of reading - learning to read 'as a writer,' learning to *imagine* how an admired work came about; learning to *discover* one's own best material; listening to *one's own racing heart* when it finds itself writing something that excites it, being willing to enter into the DREAM of a first draft - keeping the editor tied up for the time being, and then somehow maintaining a sense of that dream even while revising with the help of both internal and external editors. It is learning to trust the story to tell itself, so that, while reading over what you have just written, you may think, 'My Gosh, that's good! I wish I'd written it!' only to realize with a shock of joy that you have!

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So you see I have more work to do yet. I know how this sort of thing can be encouraged in a one-to-one relationship with a student writer but I have yet to discover how it can be done in a book. Which means it will probably take me as long to write this one as it did the first.

Which means you've got plenty of time to beat me to it!

I recommend trying things out in the classroom first. This may be in the form of handouts, but if your book, like mine, is dependent upon the works of others, and the necessity to observe copyright laws, I would suggest the 'course pack' as a solution. If your university has an arrangement with publishers, perhaps through a central agency like the Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency, it is possible for you to have a photocopied book available for your students to buy, very reasonably - with the money going, as it should, to the original authors.

Consider this a challenge. Risk finding out for yourself, if you dare, what that Klondike minister meant when he told me what it's like to be him every Sunday morning in that place. By the time I finally get my book published, you may have developed such a successful course pack for your students that you will see no reason to buy mine…depriving me of the fortune that I'm STILL counting on for my retirement fund!

Jack Hodgins teaches in the Department of Writing at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. His teaching writing text A Passion for Narrative *is published in Australia by Allen & Unwin. This paper is based on a*

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Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au