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Knowing About Airports, Teaching Writing Economy Class

> 'I knew why Charlotte went to airports even if Victor did not.
> I knew about airports.'
>
> Joan Didion, *The Book of Common Prayer*

In her essay 'Why I Write', Joan Didion explains how she wrote these two lines long before she had any idea why Charlotte went to airports, who Victor was, or even who the narrator was or why she was narrating this story. The need to write the novel these characters appeared in arose, she says, from the need to answer these questions. Over the six or so years I've been teaching writing I've found that setting students an exercise in which they write a page of narrative starting with these two lines has always produced some of the most imaginative and innovative results. It's a much more stimulating starting point for a narrative than one of Raymond Carver's suggestions: 'He was running the vacuum cleaner when the telephone rang', which just seems open to too many possibilities.

Whether these two sentences of Didion's are stimulating and productive because they provide two definite characters and a very indefinite situation I don't know, they certainly provide a ball that can be picked up and run with, and they provide plenty of potential for intrigue and mystery. Incidentally I've never got round to reading the novel they occur in, so I've never found out how she uses them, and don't particularly want to - I'm sure I'd be disappointed. Their potential is what is important. In 'Why I Write' Didion makes the process of writing sound easy: the writer begins with a series of 'shimmering' images and pictures in her mind which dictate grammar, word arrangements and sentence structures, and then proceeds to play it by ear, or play it as it lays, producing a series of characters and situations and posing a series of questions about characters and situations which need answers that seem to be made up as one goes along. Like a number of other writers, she seems to be saying that not knowing who your characters are or where they are going or what is going to happen to them is liberating: writing is a process of discovery which carries one along in its own momentum, and which is a necessary way 'to find out what I'm thinking , what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means.' A writer doesn't have to be an expert or a scholar or an intellectual, she says, or even to be able to think, but just to get high on images - it's no coincidence that her reference to 'shimmering' images evokes the experiences of LSD, schizophrenia and migraines, all of which make things shimmer but don't necessarily make them any more comprehensible. Didion doesn't talk about the hard, mechanical things like structure, rewriting or editing, but she makes the process of writing sound not only highly enjoyable but also highly intriguing. She also makes it sound as if hanging around airports is a good way of picking up ideas and images and getting creative inspiration. Having done probably more than my fair share of hanging around airports, I can relate to that. Although I can't really claim to be in the same league as Charlotte, that I 'know about airports' yet - that's something I'm still striving for, and maybe a lot of aspiring writers are striving for.

I got into teaching writing by accident - I came out of a theatre studies background, was a sometime theatre and film critic, academic and translator of Italian plays. I do those things as little as I possibly can now - I prefer to write about global popular music and Italian films, but I never do any of what is usually referred to as 'creative writing', and have no desire to. I was employed to teach performance studies at UTS seven years ago, and I'd also had a go at writing plays, stories and even poems and come to the decision that I owed it to the rest of the world not to impose any more of my creative efforts on anyone. So teaching writing for performance, and then experimental writing and an introductory writing course was strictly economy class for me, I didn't have any vested interests or axes to grind. Or so I thought. It also sounded easy: the students do all the work, all you have to do is supervise and referee workshops in which they read and criticise each other's work. It's still relatively easy; once I recognised the limitations of what one can expect to achieve, I stopped trying to aim for impossible results. Right from the start I took particular heart from the African-American playwright Ntozake Shange's comment in an interview:

> 'I don't believe you can teach writing. What you can do is help someone refine the skills and the talent that they have. A course can be geared toward assisting each student to find his or her voice and toward challenging a student who is good in one form to become better in the form he or she has chosen, as well as others. I keep assignments short because I think if you can write one concise page you are more apt to be able to write fifteen beautiful pages than if you wrote three stupid pages'. note

In his essay 'On Writing', Raymond Carver talks about putting useful statements about writing on a three-by-five card and taping it to the wall beside his desk. While I'm not in the habit of doing this, if I were I would definitely pin that quote from Shange up. Incidentally, I'm a great admirer of the clarity, simplicity and transparency of Carver's writing,

and think he's one of the best models for short narrative prose writing there is, especially when he talks about writing that is precise with no frills, that might sound flat, but still 'hits all the notes'. Producing the kind of simple, clear, stripped-back and seemingly effortless prose that Carver writes involves getting rid of unnecessary affectations like a surfeit of adjectives, which is one of the most frequent features of inexperienced writing. One of my favourite quotes of writers on writing is from Mark Twain: 'When you catch an adjective, kill it.' I think a lot of teaching writing is about hunting and catching adjectives.

But back to Shange: there are a number of points in what she is saying which I find get right to the heart of things. First, that writing can't be taught, all you can do is assist a student to find his or her voice. John Barth has said in his essay 'Can It Be taught?' that it can be taught, and not necessarily by hot-shot writers, in the sense of giving 'sustained, patient, sympathetic, intelligent critical attention to your manuscripts' a sense of aesthetic pluralism and high standards, and maybe some assistance with getting into print. And whether you agree or not that it can be taught, it still gets learned, studied, practiced and reacted to: as Barth says'those with any aptitude for it it ... hone what skills they have' in creative writing classes. You only have to compare the quality of writing some students produce at the end of semester to what they've produced at the beginning to see the sense in that. You can teach the mechanics of writing like grammar and syntax and layout and form, I've done that and I'm glad I don't have to do it any more, it's boring. Teaching writing for me is what I refer to as a 'catalytic Socratic' process: suggesting, prompting, coaxing, nudging or assisting, evaluating, dialoguing about or debating students' writing. The main process through which this is achieved is usually referred to by the dreaded expression 'workshopping'. The term 'workshopping' always makes me think of 'sheltered workshops' or naff drama workshops where the teacher says 'Today let's all pretend we're trees', or else what Wendy Harmer used to say when audiences didn't laugh at one of her jokes: 'Take that one away and workshop it for a while.' But despite its naff connotations, and as obvious as it may be, workshopping still seems to me the best way of getting writing students to do some of the hard work for you, of setting up an etiquette of criticising one another's work constructively and helpfully, without being tactless or destructive, of generating and bouncing ideas around a group, and of orchestrating a sense of productive and creative community in which students can help one another and contribute towards a sense of improvement and quality. Again it's an obvious point, but students are often more responsive to criticism from their peers than criticism from any sort of authority figure, although this process only goes so far; it's sometimes necessary to enforce certain principles which have been arrived at through the pain of experience. The same principles apply to teaching Writing for Performance: it's important for students to see what their work looks like and sounds like when it's performed, even though the performance is by fellow students with mixed performing abilities. I also think it's important for it to be watched and listened to without reference to a script: if it doesn't come over in a reading without the help of the script it's unlikely to come over in any real performance. The crudest performance of a performance text can still generate an image of how that text looks and sounds in peformance, whether it will work, what's wrong with it if it doesn't, and how it can be fixed, strengthened or tightened. Also, by participating in the performance process, everyone gets some kind of sense of what actors have to do with texts, how to write actable texts, how to perform texts, and the qualities they need to generate good performances.

I always start my first year writing course by discussing an essay by Glenda Adams entitled 'Calling Up the Spirits'; once or twice I've been lucky enough to get her to deliver it to my class in person. Glenda's essay is all about finding the writer's voice and the concrete image (both of which are always powerful in Carver's work), and she illustrates both quickly and simply, giving clear examples of writing which has a strong, distinctive sense of voice, and writing that doesn't. The writing that doesn't sometimes induces groans of recognition, and it's usually writing that is forced, too laboured over, or trying too hard. The writing that does display a voice often happens unconsciously, or by accident, but as Glenda says:

> 'All writers are capable of producing unexceptional, overwritten, voiceless prose. A great part of the writer's task is to recognise the dead pasages and then to find ways through them, beyond them, to achieve or retrieve the voice in order to develop the work.' note

I think that's another very quotable quote, as it refers to what is often the hardest part of writing, but it's an important part of the job of teaching writing to help students 'recognise the dead passages' and 'achieve or retrieve the voice.' But how does one achieve the voice? The simple answer is it's either there or it isn't, and usually if it's there you recognise it immediately because it jumps off the page at you, if it isn't it doesn't; it's hard to conceptualise it in any more scientific terms. But if you find it and you can run with it, and that's what the over-used and often meaningless term 'narrative flow' is all about. Rather like Didion, Adams also suggests that the process of writing is almost an unconscious, quasi-mystical procedure of mediation, midwifery and image-weaving:

> 'the proces of discovering, uncovering, exploring both subject matter and meaning as the work is written seems first to have to do with getting the voice right, with simplicity of style ... and with the weilding of the concrete image, while the writer stands to one side so that the image can get to work on his or her behalf.'

More contentiously, she also suggests that the conventional formal elements of narrative prose writing - plot, character, setting and theme - provide an important means and method to explore and discover meaning and achieve a distinctive voice, and are far more important than the particular genre of the writing, especially in the case of

experimental, ficto-critical, anti-narrative, postmodern or post-whatever writing. This is contentious because this particular institution has a reputation for producing writing that is experimental, ficto-critical, anti-narrative, postmodern and post-whatever, but that is sometimes, in my view, lacking in voice or depth or interest. As John Barth has indicated, it's not important whether writing is experimental or post-modern or trans-generic, what's important is whether it's terrific writing. Maybe that's got something to do with why I stopped teaching experimental writing - not so much beacuse I stopped believing it was possible, but because the kind of responses I was getting to it were very discouraging - my students didn't seem at all impressed by models like Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Coover, Calvino, Barthelmne etc. maybe because they came from remote periods in time and remote European or American cultures. What is important to write out of a sense of compulsion and necessity (one of the reasons I gave up creative writing - as James Michener said, 'Unless you think you can do better than Tolstoy, we don't need you' - but then who needs James Michener?). But being excessively concerned with adhering to rules and conventions of writing is as bad as being excessively concerned with breaking them. What is important is saying what one needs to say and saying it sharply, clearly and unfussily, rather than posturing and fussing about whether one is going to write in the style of Kafka, Calvino, Tarantino, Helen Garner or Judith Krantz. Borrowed or pastiched voices are usually easy to detect, and generic playfulness and tricksy metafictional posturing is most often irritating and boring, unless you're Calvino, and there was only one of him. I think the same principles also apply to critical writing, which I do a lot of. As Carver put it: 'At the first sign of a trick or a gimmick in a piece of fiction, I tend to look for cover. ... Too often "experimentation" is a license to be careless, silly or imitative.'

Another important point in Shange's statement is to do with short exercises: it definitely is a lot harder to write fifteen beatiful pages than one concise page, but if you can do the latter you're more inclined to be able to do the former. It's also a good incentive for precision and concision; as Carver put it, 'Get in, get out, Don't linger.' One thing about finding a voice is that the voice can manifest itself very quickly: you can usually tell by the end of the first paragraph of a piece of prose if it's any good. One page weekly writing exercices also have the advantage of giving classes a chance to look at everybody's work while it's still freshly written, as well as enabling students to explore and experiment with a wide variety of different forms of writing. In my first year writing class, which covers writing for performance and poetry as well as prose writing, and is very much an economy class and minimalist course, it enables me to set a new exercise every week, and all the work is gone over in class. I refuse to read anything outside class time until students hand in their final writing assignments at the end of semester, which often may involve reworkings of some of the short exercies done for class. The reader's first impressions are all important, I argue: if you can't hook a first-time reader with your first sentence and then sustain their interest you haven't found a voice and the writing's not working. Finding a voice can also involve assuming another voice, which is what is important about doing work around characterisation, as well as discussing the perils and pitfalls and possibilities of crossing gender, race and ethnicity in this process.

I'm a great believer in hooks and triggers, whatever form of writing is involved, and while I distrust most writing manuals, I find the Irish writer Tom Gallagher's book Writing for the Stage the most useful manual I've come across. Gallagher poses five essential questions that need to be asked about any play: why does this happen to these people? Why does it happen here? Why does it happen now? What is changed by its happening? And Why could it not happen any other way? It's instructive to use these questions, once you've stablished all their implications, to analyse old episodes of 'Roseanne' - that's the way I usually start my Writing for Performance classes. It's a simple enough process, but it gets to the basics, and I think it can be applied to a lot of prose writing too.

With the exception of my Didion airport exercise, which is aimed at generating narrative, in my first year writing class I tend to set generic exercises which are as broad as possible and offer a wide scope of interpretation: for example, a short biographical or character sketch in first or third person (in the latter case this is often more interesting in what it reveals about the narrator than about the subject), a description of a place (with or without people), a first person 'interior monologue', a dialogue in prose form, a dialogue in dramatic form, a short dramatic sketch with at least three characters, a haiku, a sound poem. Sometimes students want more constraints than this, but I've usually found the less constraints, the greater likelihood of freeing up the creative impulses, and helping to refine writing skills. I also tend to assume writer's block is something that doesn't exist in short weekly exercises - most people usually manage to produce something and learn something in the process, and the pressure of not making a fool of oneself means it's often something with some merits to found. Of course not everyone meets the deadline of doing a page of writing every week - if they did, we probably wouldn't have time to look at them all.

Part of the process of learning how to write involves looking at the things that writers one admires say about writing, but sometimes the things that writers say about writing aren't always helpful; sometimes they sound disingenuous, misleading and even dishonest. Didion makes it all sound too easy, Carver seems to come close to saying that commonplace writing is better than inventive and imaginative writing, Orwell rather disingenuosly claims that writing is primarily a form of egoism ('all writers are vain, selfish and lazy') and that asthetics were more important to him than politics. In an essay called 'Writing in the Cold' which we have sometimes included in first year writing classes out of a sense of perverseness and provocation, Ted Solotaroff argues that suffering, pain, hardship and years of long stuggle 'out in the cold' are necessary to produce good writing . Maybe they are in many cases, but that's not the sort of thing writing students or aspiring writers want to hear, although maybe they need to hear it. One of my ex-writing students rings me from time to time to tell me about the tally of rejection slips she keeps getting, and I don't have the heart to tell her I don't think she's ever going to get published. Nor do Writing students want to hear that

writers should expect to 'remain unknown and unrewarded for ten years or so', although I tried that out on an ex-student who rang me while I was writing that sentence. He replied, 'I never expected to be known or read.' I asked him what he was doing: he replied 'a course in teaching English as a foreign language. I graduated with a major in Fiction Writing and there aren't many jobs out there for fiction writers.' But a significant number of our ex-students get novels or books of fiction published two or three years after graduating - maybe that says something about the rate of fiction publishing in Australia - maybe it's easier to get published here than in the USA, but that doesn't necessarily mean that ten years suffering should be a pre-requisite to recognition . Solotaroff also claims that graduate writing programs in universities are wasted on the young, serve as 'greenhouses' that only produce well-made stories which teach well in class, and cushion students against the real struggle of writing - being out there 'in the cold'. He sees creative writing programs as sinecures for struggling creative writers - as well as offering them the attraction of plenty of free time! and even as 'devitalising the relationship between literature and society' - presumably a relationship based on suffering. He also portrays the typical writing student as institutionally bound, limited in any understanding of life to books and films, 'rebelling in predictable ways' against family and culture, and inexperienced in love, friendship and travel. His conclusion that 'the life of published fiction writers is most often the exchange of one level of rejection, uncertainty and disappointment for another' is enough to put most aspiring writers off pursuing a writer's career, or even to induce them to slash their wrists, which may be his purpose. His very devil's advocate-style notions of 'get out there and live and suffer' sound inceasingly dated and outmoded, especially in end-of-the-milleunium Sydney, but they do call for justification and accountability of university writing programs, which I hope I have taken some steps towards providing in these remarks.

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LETTERS AND DEBATE

Letter from Terry O'Connor

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