



*A Field Guide
for Writers*

THE ART
OF CREATIVE
RESEARCH

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1 WHAT CREATIVE RESEARCH IS AND HOW TO USE IT

The only things I can't write about are things that I am ignorant about, and that can always be changed. —Jacob Bateman, poet

Somewhere in our schooling, the idea of research got separated from our creative impulse. The kids who went into science do research. Maybe the historians and social scientists, too. And, of course, we all suffered through writing the required “research” paper in high school or college, in which we rounded up a specified number of reputable sources to splint the bones of our argument. And maybe journalists need to quote sources for the sake of credibility. But poets? Novelists? Personal essayists? Don’t we just reach deep into the well of our imaginations and subconscious minds and produce art? Well, not exactly. Sometimes it’s not enough simply to peer intently into your own soul. Sometimes you have to look out the window and see the world in all its complicated glory.

Think of Rita Dove’s haunting book of poems, *Thomas and Beulah*, based on the lives of her African American grandparents. True, she achieves poetic power by imagining herself into their lives and by creating a living sense of them for us on the page. But to do that, she first had to discover all she could about them. Her declared intent was to remind us that these were *real* people, that their lives actually hap-

pened and were not just artistic constructs, that those lives contained both mystery and beauty along with hardship and suffering. Drawing from the actual known details of their lives would honor them. Think, too, of Carolyn Forché's mesmerizing book of poems, *The Country Between Us*, based on her experience on the ground during the time of the death squads and impending war in El Salvador, using poetry to try to understand the savagery she witnessed—and make it known to the world in a more powerful and lasting form than a daily news story.

Lavonne J. Adams had published scores of personally inspired poems before she wrote an enchanting cycle of poems about women on the Santa Fe Trail, *Through the Glorieta Pass*—a breakthrough experience that opened up a whole new dimension in her poetry. A simple assignment that she gave to her poetry class prodded her to venture so far afield in search of subject matter—an assignment designed to jar students away from writing only what was familiar and comfortable. She describes the experience this way:

Students of poetry, in the initial stages of the development of their craft, often write about their own experiences, which is an unarguable means of claiming authority in the writing. During a semester in which an intermediate workshop group shared an inordinate number of poems about romance-gone-awry, I pondered ways that I might encourage them to consider other topics. I wondered if shifting from subjects in which they had a strong emotional stake, to others that might be less personally inspired or traumatic, would allow these poets the distance that they need to focus on craft. My hypothesis was that they could then return to more personal poetry with greater insight and mastery over imagery, language, voice, and form.

Adams goes on, "The assignment was simple: choose a topic and research, write a poem about that topic. I began to write in this vein along with my students, delighted in the temporary liberation from my own life, or thoughts on life in general, within my poetry."

Like so many writers, Adams often finds that the surprises, even

the disappointments, inherent in research often turn out to be the most inspiring moments. As she recounts:

Though I've found that traveling for the sake of research isn't a necessity, it can certainly enrich the experience for the author, as well as provide another level of engagement in the resulting creative work.

For example, while investigating the life and art of Georgia O'Keeffe, I was able to take a brief trip to Lake George, New York, where O'Keeffe and husband Alfred Stieglitz spent many summers. My first day there, I wandered the heart of the village, examining buildings, noting trees, the way light struck the lake and the surrounding mountains. I was frustrated when an unexpected afternoon storm swept across the lake, forcing me to take shelter. The next day, I visited a quaint brick building with spires, the former county courthouse, which now houses the Lake George Historical Association & Museum. There, I studied artifacts, read placards that described how quickly storms formed, the impressive number of resulting wrecks found lying at the bottom of the lake. When I saw a photograph of O'Keeffe's painting, *Storm Cloud, Lake George*, all of these elements combined to create a rendition of an ill-fated afternoon on the lake, when Stieglitz and O'Keeffe witnessed two boys drown.

Adams gains an important grounding in such factual events, but ultimately the facts are only as interesting as the poet can make them, as she turns them into something larger and more meaningful, actions and images that resonate beyond the historical moment and even beyond the poem. She says, "But real authority is something more craft-oriented—the engagement of the poet with the subject matter."

When Stephen Crane wrote his novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, the Civil War was already settled history. His research took place at the feet of old veterans reminiscing on porches, and he listened carefully. When he wrote "The Open Boat," a short story, he was drawing on his own (unintended) research of being shipwrecked off Florida while en route to cover the rebellion in Cuba in 1896. In fact, he first wrote a reportorial nonfiction account of the incident and then shaped the raw material of fact into fiction. Mark Twain earned di-

rect personal experience as a riverboat pilot, but he also closely—and intentionally—observed legendary river men like Horace Bixby to write *Life on the Mississippi*. Ted Conover rode the rails across America for a season to find out about the hobo life by living it for his book *Rolling Nowhere*, as complete an immersion experience as one can imagine. Later he reprised part of his hobo trip with his grown son, adding a new lens to the experience—and also using the journey to deepen his understanding of fatherhood.

It's not hard to come up with a pretty impressive list of writers of all genres who intentionally addressed public events, history, science, technology, and all manner of other subjects through research, including deliberately creating an experience to write from. The nonfiction writers are obvious: Tracy Kidder (*The Soul of a New Machine*), Joan Didion (*Miami*), Randall Kenan (*Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*), Barry Lopez (*Arctic Dreams*)—the start of a long and distinguished list. But on reflection, so are the novelists: Charles Frazier (*Cold Mountain*), Joyce Carol Oates (*Blonde*), Larry McMurtry (*Lonesome Dove*), David Guterson (*Snow Falling on Cedars*), Thomas Keneally (*Schindler's List*), Toni Morrison (*Beloved*)—another lengthening list.

As for poets, Emily Dickinson may have spent a lot of time indoors, but she was constantly in touch with the public figures of her day and deeply affected by the wholesale death of the Civil War, which she followed in the newspapers and from the personal accounts of friends, and which informs a large portion of her work with an unsettling darkness. Her contemporary Walt Whitman went south to witness the suffering for himself as a hospital worker, then wrote *Drum-Taps*, a sequence of forty-three poems about the human side of the conflict—and more in *Leaves of Grass*. Documentary poetry has usually come to the fore during times of crisis and social unrest—such as the Great Depression, which gave us Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free*, featuring gritty photographs and poetic social comment; or the Harlem Renaissance, which gave us Langston Hughes, among many other poets addressing history and justice (“Remember / The days of bondage”). In more contemporary times, poets are

resurrecting this documentary impulse, voicing deeply informed lines about race, genocide, war, justice, history, and contemporary culture. Not all write about deeply controversial social subjects. The late William Matthews, for instance, wrote passionately and knowingly about jazz.

So creative research is a matter of discovery of both the facts of the world that can be turned to artistic purpose and the method of finding out those facts, which in itself is a creative act. The journey of research is a drama all its own. The discoveries don't just fill in a few blanks to make a piece feel authentic; rather they often inspire the creation of a poem, an essay, or a story to somehow contain the discovery—a work of art not previously envisioned by the writer. The act of creative research begins the moment the writer decides to venture into the world beyond his or her own knowledge and experience.

THE ACTUALITY AND THE ZONE OF NOISE

A nonfiction writer may be trying to pin down exactly the complicated facts of an event or life. A poet or novelist may be after authenticity—a reliable feel for a historical period or profession or place that he or she can then transform through invented characters or imagery.

Think of a true fact as a pencil point in the middle of a blank page. Now draw a small circle around that point. Inside this first circle are all the sources that directly touch what we'll call the “Actuality”: physical evidence, eyewitness accounts, film, video, or audio of the event in real time; letters and diaries written by the people involved; police reports, maps, medical charts, or birth certificates written at or very close to the moment in question by people directly involved in the event—including, perhaps, you the author. Call these primary sources. The next circle out gets bigger and more encompassing. It contains reputable scholarship; contemporaneous journalism or other reporting; scientific studies; official investigations; trial transcripts; oral histories or memoirs created long after the fact; theories and analysis and informed speculation—all of them one big step removed from direct contact with the people and events of the actual-

ity. These are secondary sources. Beyond that is what I call the Zone of Noise—the largest circle. This zone contains material far removed from direct contact: tradition, family lore, rumor, popular culture, blogs, opinion, and so on. It contains a measure of truth—but also distortion, falsehood, misinterpretation, irrelevancies, propaganda, and just plain fiction.

Your job as a researcher is to pass through the Zone of Noise—if need be tied to the mast like Odysseus, with wax stuffed in your ears to keep out the siren call of convenient drama. Then, guided by the clues and sources embedded in the second circle, you do your best to penetrate into the first circle of primary data. To get as close to the Actuality as you can. But the process is likely to be analogous to celestial navigation. The art of celestial navigation posits that, for every moment in time, you can plot your exact point on the Earth's surface, through the use of a sextant and some trigonometry. True enough, but rare is the navigator who, on the pitching deck of a small boat, using imperfect gifts and prone to mathematical errors, can pinpoint his or her position exactly. The best navigators, after long practice, using three stars or sun sights can locate their vessels inside a small triangle of ocean a few square miles in extent—a triangle that gets smaller and smaller with diligent practice.

The navigator approaches the knowledge of exact location and with practice gets closer and closer in that approach. But even when he or she is perfectly mathematically correct, it is unlikely that the navigator can be any more certain than at other times. That is, even when you have hit on the exact truth, you are unlikely to be certain if that is indeed the case. Still, if the navigator can steer a safe passage between the rocks and into a harbor, the calculation has proved accurate enough. So, too, the writer. With practice, you'll learn when to trust an eyewitness account and when it strikes you as fishy; you'll become adept at "triangulating," the way a navigator does—locating the truth somewhere in the intersection of several conflicting accounts; you will recognize that when a story seems too good to be true, it usually is. You will find yourself so close to the Actuality that you can feel it present in your words on the page and know you have approached as

closely as you are ever likely to come to the literal truth of what was said or done. Then you can use that truth to your own artistic purpose.

Here a word about primary sources—the stuff in that first circle. Whether a source is primary depends to a large extent on how you are using it, what it is there to "prove." So a newspaper account written during the time of the event may contain many errors—may even be deliberately falsified, as were many journalistic accounts of Civil War battles, to either underestimate the losses of one side or overstate the losses of the other or to plump the reputation of a patron general. So they are not necessarily reliable primary sources for how many men died or were wounded—or even which side won the battle. But they stand as excellent primary sources for the way in which the war was reported, for the kind of language and sentiment that made its way into the public square.

Likewise, a trial transcript is essentially a secondary source as it relates to the events at the heart of the crime or lawsuit. The conflicting theories of the crime, as put forward by the lawyers on both sides, are essentially hypotheses to be tested by evidence, logic, and testimony. Both cannot be true at once. Remember, the whole American judicial process rests not on measures of certainty but on *degrees of doubt*. But embedded within the transcript are many primary sources—the exact charges or grievances; the applicable statutes; documents or physical evidence entered into the record; the testimony of eyewitnesses, experts, and the accused; facts independently verified regarding weather, location, and other matters of context. And here it's worth noting that the court reporter is perhaps the only person on the public payroll whose job it is to produce an exact, unabridged, truthful record of what is spoken by all parties in an encounter—in this case, in the courtroom. Even sustained objections and matters to be stricken from the record and disregarded by the jury remain in the official transcript, in case of review by an appellate court, which may need to take them into account in its deliberations.

So the transcript is a reliable primary source about the trial itself. But it remains one important step removed from the Actuality. You can know exactly what a witness said, but how do you know if he or

she is telling the truth? Misremembering? Leaving out important details? Trial lawyers know this well. All the circumstantial evidence that's available can point to the "obvious" guilt of a completely innocent person. Different juries, reviewing the exact same evidence, can arrive at completely opposite decisions regarding guilt or innocence.

In the title essay of her book *The Partly Cloudy Patriot*, Sarah Vowell proclaims a truth I have come to know well in writing about the Civil War and other American adventures: "American history is a quagmire, and the more one knows, the quaggier the mire gets." She is addressing the complicated nature of events and motives, as well as the sheer difficulty of knowing anything—even the seemingly most basic fact—for sure. Every new thing you find out tends to contradict the last thing you found out. Facts, evidence, clues—whatever you want to call them—are only as true as the story we use them to tell. And I use the term *story* loosely to mean the vital stuff of human behavior, whether it winds up in narrative or a lyric poem or an essay of ideas. A poem or fictional story is "true" if it offers insight into the way human beings actually behave, feel, think, aspire, dream. For the nonfiction writer, "true" also means truthful to the most verifiable version of events.

As writers we find our material in what we have experienced and in what we know. Sometimes the experience, as it happens by chance and circumstance, is enough to fuel a body of work. But often the writer deliberately seeks out experience and knowledge of some kind in order to enlarge the scope of his or her canvas. Sometimes the facts point to an obvious story. But more often there is a larger true thing, a Big Fact behind the Facts of the Case. It is this fact behind the facts that determines the meanings of all the other facts, creates a context for interpreting what our eyes are seeing and what our informants are telling us, and dictates the true syntax of a story.

THE SYNTAX OF STORY

A story is a created thing—whether we're trafficking in fiction or nonfiction. It is the artful manipulation of facts, events, emotions,

characters, time, and language to convey human experience that is authentic—not cartoonish or formulaic. And every story, like every sentence, has a syntax, a dynamic cohesion that determines meaning, based on three qualities that every word in a sentence has—as does every element of a story:

1. Sequence: in what order the elements are arranged (which may differ from the order in which they occurred), and where in that sequence any particular element fits.
2. Priority: the importance of any element relative to any other element.
3. Relationship: a special connection to each other element and to the story as a whole.

You can see at once that *priority* involves a *sequence* of subordination—this thing is more or less important than that other thing. And of course to say that implies a *relationship* or lack thereof between any two elements—and assumes you have discovered all the elements, including that first big fact that colors all the others individually and collectively.

Finding the fact behind the facts is crucial in both public and private stories. Sometimes the implications are personally important, as in a wonderful student memoir I once read. The writer remembered a childhood without a mother in which her father did his best by her—but kept her from contact with his estranged wife, her mother, whom she missed terribly. Rather than simply wallow in her bitter-sweet memories, she approached her own childhood story as an investigator: she interviewed her father, other family members, former teachers, the neighbor woman who used to babysit her after school while her father was still at work. She learned that in reality her father had been shielding her all those years from a dangerously unbalanced, drug-addicted mother who might have harmed her in all sorts of ways. Her father had sacrificed heroically and without complaint to give her a childhood free of crisis and damage—her calm, safe, happy childhood was a gift of love from her father, at a significant cost to him. This was the controlling fact behind all the other

facts of the story that lent context and meaning. Her memoir, like all true memoirs, turned out not to be simply a scrapbook of memories to brood over or cherish, not a highlight reel of her life, but a meaningful *reckoning*.

Memory can be warped. It lies. It tells us what we want to hear. So another part of the lesson is to work beyond personal knowledge and thus beyond memory, to test that memory against the other evidence of the world. Memory will rarely match that other evidence very neatly, but this is a good thing for the writer. Discrepancy between memory and other evidence—like discrepancy between any researched “facts”—is not a problem. It’s the point. The reckoning, the true story, lives in the space between the contradictions.

Bronwen Dickey—a journalist who writes for *Outside*, the *Oxford American*, *Newsweek*, and many other magazines—is alert to the challenge of finding out verifiable facts, the bedrock satisfaction of knowing something for sure. In researching *Pit Bull: The Battle over an American Icon*, she has come to regard the breed as “the world’s biggest Rorschach test.” Everyone she talks to is absolutely certain about “facts” that have absolutely no basis in reality. Even peer-reviewed medical journals turn out to be sourced from popular media, which have been sourced from urban legend or myth. “Never ever lose your sense of skepticism—benevolent skepticism, but skepticism,” Dickey warns. “As a writer, the most important tool in your toolbox is the question: How do you know that?”

Whenever possible, track the information back to a primary source, then ask yourself: How reliable is that source? Whatever form this search for knowing takes, it is research. It becomes *creative* when the writer applies imagination and artfulness to the manner in which it is pursued—and then incorporated into the work. That is, the writer doesn’t just Google a few facts or read a couple of books, but rather designs a research plan to get to the bottom of something in a profound way, then uses that knowledge to shape the form and content of the writing—not as mere decoration, but as deeply embedded, founding truth. Sometimes the very lexicon of the subject being researched becomes the language of the creative work.

In creative research, crucial and relevant information may be discovered in places where others forget to look, in sources that require some ingenuity to discover. Creative research is both a process and a habit of mind, an alertness to the human story as it lurks in unlikely places, in the forgotten words of witnesses, in the connections a sharp observer makes between two disparate caches of knowledge. So part of this book will be devoted to the practical skills of finding and acquiring relevant knowledge. And part will address the ways in which a writer can incorporate such knowledge into poems and stories, both factual and fictional, to make more profound art. Just as true suspense in a story is achieved by what the writer *reveals*, not *conceals*, the artistic use of facts, information, knowledge, and ideas can create dramatic tension; can infuse a line of poetry with authority and power; can endow a fictional character with absolute plausible authenticity. Deep and broad knowledge of the world can enlarge you as an artist, no matter what your chosen genre—and likely in the course of your writing life, you’ll work in more than one.

To use all those ingredients, you first have to find them. The aim of this book is to help you figure out ways to find them.

FIRST PRINCIPLES

In writing this book, I have considered deeply the question of who can benefit from reading it. My answer is that I want to address writers at various stages of their careers. In my very long experience of teaching at large state institutions and at a small liberal arts college, leading conference workshops, writing for newspapers and magazines, as well as pursuing book-length projects and television and radio pieces, I have learned never to discount first principles. That is, over and over again, I have seen seasoned writers overlooking very basic matters, habits, and techniques that would seem to be no-brainers for anyone who has been writing for a while. Indeed, I have to remind myself constantly of the need to listen, to be fluent in whatever technology I plan to use, and so on. No matter how experienced a writer is, he or she should, from time to time, revisit first principles.

Likewise, it's clear that most younger writers—digital natives—don't need to be reminded to access social media, which of course changes constantly. Or at least to use it in familiar ways. But social media and Internet databases are revolutionizing culture and our access to it, and we need to be creative with it, to use it for more than the usual interactions. More important is that I have learned not to underestimate novice or undergraduate writers. Being a novice doesn't mean that a writer can't tackle an important or challenging subject. Undergraduate students of mine have frequently pursued challenging projects, and their success was as much a matter of their ingenuity and determination as any particular talent. And often they do this close to home. One recent student went searching among the archives in the local historical society and found the record of the first victim of the yellow fever epidemic in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1862—a young seaman visiting a waterfront brothel. She also traced the young woman from the brothel, a Confederate officer who was having an affair with another local woman, a spy, and other real-life figures. Then she crafted a beautiful historical novel weaving together all their stories into an epic of love, tragedy, betrayal, and war.

Other undergraduates have sought out elderly family members and interviewed them in order to write memoirs, short stories, and poems. And while most of them can't afford to travel to pursue a story, plenty of them have incorporated research into trips they were taking anyway, on family vacations or semesters abroad, and this, too, is a good lesson for the writer: if you're going to be in an interesting place for other reasons, take advantage of the chance to find its stories.

Whatever project you are contemplating, start with a couple of simple precepts. First, variety of experience is your ally. There are lots of ways to do valuable research, and there is almost always more than one way to find out what you need to know. Second, you probably come to any new project knowing more than you realize—and part of your research is to figure out what you already know and how to use it. We'll talk more about this "narrative intelligence" later on in the chapter. And third, whether you are a total novice or an experienced writer, you need to dare a little—to push beyond your comfort zone.

There is—in my book at least—no such thing as a "student writer." Every writer is dead earnest about his or her project, and nobody cuts an inexperienced writer any slack—that writer must live up to the demands of the material. But it's also true that every writer is a student of his or her current project and must pay close attention to it, let it teach us what we need to know in order to tackle it.

Writers tend to be experienced in the various aspects of the craft to differing degrees. A memoirist might feel right at home baring secret thoughts but intimidated about interviewing a distant relative whose memories could illuminate her personal story. A seasoned reporter might know how to discover any elusive fact held in an archive but has never tried to fashion such facts into a narrative. A poet might be brilliant with language but scientifically illiterate. A novelist might have a well-honed sense of human ambition but lack an understanding of the social history that brought his characters to entertain such ambitions.

Like many young writers, I chose my original genre—fiction—to early and somehow absorbed the notion that writing short stories and novels meant sitting alone and consulting my imagination, to the exclusion of anything else. That doing what journalists call "reporting" (and I simply think of as "research") was somehow cheating, that it meant my imagination wasn't large enough to produce great stories out of my own genius. And it was true—my imagination wasn't yet large enough. But imagination isn't static. We aren't born with a certain finite amount, and that's that. Like talent and memory, imagination must be nurtured and cultivated through use. One way to apply imagination is to explore places, lives, events, subjects of all kinds that lie outside our direct personal experience. Deliberately venturing out into the world to learn its secrets fuels the imagination and enlarges it, creates a feedback loop as the knowledge you have gained catalyzes with your own native intelligence and leads you to further exploration of things and ideas. Your imagination grows and becomes more nimble. But I grant you, it can be daunting, especially the first time you take that big leap of faith and embark on a journey that may test your resources.

During the Solidarity revolution in Poland, I got a notion to see for myself how my grandfather's homeland was enjoying its new freedoms. I took a flier, queried a magazine, and drummed up an assignment for two long stories—one of them focused on locating any family who had survived World War II, the other exploring the national veneration of the Virgin Mary, a movement that had aided Pope John Paul II in breaking the hold of the communist government on his native country. I knew no one in Poland, couldn't speak the very difficult language, and was traveling on a very modest budget into a country where the national currency, the *zloty*, was in free fall. I was advised to carry cash in small denominations, so I stuffed a money belt with US\$3,000 in tens and twenties. I took a deep breath and drove to New York, almost surprised to find that the promised airplane ticket was waiting for me at JFK airport.

I roamed the cities and countryside of Poland for ten days on slow trains and trams and in rattletrap private cars, walked the dark avenues of Warsaw and the shambles of the Gdańsk waterfront. Through a chance encounter with a stranger on a train, I located long-lost cousins; and through a translator, I interviewed members of Solidarity in their Gdańsk headquarters. I even saw Lech Walesa at his home. I was simply astonished at how well the trip had gone, how all the obstacles had somehow melted away, how I already had the two magazine stories in my notebook and a short story forming in my imagination.

When I returned from Poland, still jet-lagged, to the Bread Loaf Writers Conference in Vermont, I confided this to my longtime friend Bob Reiss, who has traveled every continent in search of material for both true stories and novels. He said, "Yeah, it's amazing, isn't it—how often the only difference between not doing something and doing it is *doing it*." It was a lesson I never forgot. We can hem and haw and make up all the reasonable excuses in the world—no contacts, lack of funds, hard to get time off work, don't speak the language, don't have any experience, can't get a publisher in advance so maybe the whole thing will wind up in my desk drawer—but in the end, if we want to pursue a story, for whatever reason, we can find a way. We

can go where it lives and hunt it down and—as they say—bring it back alive.

NARRATIVE INTELLIGENCE

Remember, when you're at the very start of a project, any project, during that limbo moment when you're not sure whether to proceed, whether you'll remain interested long enough to see it through, whether the story or poem will even pan out: You do not begin in blank ignorance. You already have a store of what I call *narrative intelligence*. It is axiomatic that all writing is autobiographical—that is, it springs from the life experience and character of the writer. This is obviously true in memoir and personal essay, but the writer is equally if more subtly present in reportage and other kinds of third-person narrative, including and especially fiction. And the poet is certainly present in every line of his or her poem.

Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd ask and answer a basic question in *Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*: "What happens when you begin reading a book or an essay or a magazine story? If the writing is at all interesting, you are in search of the author. You are imagining the mind behind the prose. No matter how discreet or unforthcoming writers may be, they are present, and readers form judgments about them."

Narrative intelligence is my term for talking about the ineffable way in which an author inhabits a piece of writing, the way in which the work itself becomes an embodiment of personality in highly distinctive ways—or, occasionally and oddly, not at all. Narrative intelligence in this sense is the soul of the work. When we say we recognize the work of an author simply by reading his or her sentences, we are actually talking about something deeper than style that results in style. Narrative intelligence conveys the sense that the author is thinking below the lines, that the unfolding story is not merely a list of events, however vividly presented, not merely experience accurately recounted, nor merely a catalog of information, however useful, or vivid and original images; rather it is ballasted by a matrix of

interlocking ideas, informed by a system of values, and carried along by an urgent logic, underpinned by a lifetime of knowledge—all of which is quite personal to the author, in sum as identifiable as a fingerprint.

So you don't start from scratch. You start with motivation that derives from your passions. You start with a set of skills and practical assets. Once you have settled on a subject, you can get to work in earnest.

FREEING THE WRITER

One of the great advantages of writing from research is that it frees us from the burden of our own self-consciousness. What I mean is that while devoting our attention to another subject—people, events, phenomena—we escape the constant scathing introspection that can bring on emotional exhaustion and a kind of paralysis that we mistake for writer's block. For the relatively inexperienced writer still getting control over basic elements of craft, as well as for the deeply introspective writer who regularly mines his or her own personal experience, writing from research can offer an emotional respite. That doesn't mean that the writer doesn't invest emotion in the subject, only that the investment is of a different kind—active empathy for other lives—that takes us out of ourselves in a useful way. When we come back into ourselves, we do so with a new perspective.

Instead of struggling to master both the meaning of his own life and the craft of fiction, say, a young writer can turn the focus of his craft away from his own life and toward another's—mastering story-craft but not simultaneously having to also master the deepest traumas of his own life. He can do that once he has more confidence in his craft. And in fact, I would argue, in so doing, he might very well come to terms with extremely personal issues by a side door, obliquely, since none of us can escape inhabiting the pages we write. Likewise the seasoned poet or memoirist who has spent years examining her own personal experience might lose her self-consciousness while exploring the lives of others in very unfamiliar circumstances—and in

so doing discover a whole new vein of creative ore. Such a change of pace can refresh the imagination and spirit and, of course, whatever the apparent subject the writer engages, she is always also writing about herself. She is just finding a new part of herself, a new way of addressing her passions, through history or science or the biography of another.

As with any new activity, the very act of trying a new slant can jolt the writer into discoveries, unlock hidden talents. As a poet, you might never have conducted an interview—that's what *reporters* do, you say. Yet poetry is all about *voice* in every sense, and what better way to understand voice than by listening to the voices of others—their tone and cadence and idiom? It may turn out that you have great instincts as an interviewer. And cultivating the art of listening is about as good a way as I can think of to internalize the nuances of different voices.

As an essayist, you love ideas and events and might balk at examining, say, a budget—yet a budget is a statement of the values of whatever organization adopts it, as well as an expression of hope that the future will turn out according to a given prediction expressed in numbers. A budget is an expression of philosophy—ideas—and also a blueprint for future events. It expresses an ethical stance. It makes sense that we reveal our priorities by what we are willing to spend our money on—and how much: Battle tanks or famine relief? Affordable housing or a new sports stadium? A special education teacher or another administrator? You just have to practice reading such a dry document and learn to tease out its inherent drama. Once you have trained yourself to do that, you have essentially learned a whole new language with which to listen to stories. Likewise census data or medical statistics might make your eyes glaze over, yet these also express human truths: how many people were living in a given house in a certain year, what are the chances that a child will outlive infancy, the cash value of a teenaged female slave in 1860, and so on. Hidden in the numbers are real people and real experience, and with a little effort and patience you can unlock them and—just as important—connect them to other truths.

The kinds of tools found in any scientist's field bag—binoculars, magnifying glass, thermometer, scale, calipers, tape measure, and so on—might seem irrelevant to a novelist, until she finds herself examining an heirloom Victorian pendant she wants her character to wear, or determining her shoe size from a museum artifact, or knowing how much a whalebone corset weighs—all of which might be part of the intimate reality of her character. The true role of research is to help you discover what can be known about something, which can then shape how you think about it and value it—and ultimately how you explore its meaning in words. Like a detective, the good researcher follows where the evidence leads—without prejudice or assumptions. This is how we enlarge ourselves as writers and humane individuals.

So, in fact, there is an ethical dimension to the art of research. The literary researcher—no less than the scientist or historian—is committed to finding truth based on evidence rather than mere bias. We write our novels or essays or poems not simply to “prove” what we believe to be true but to venture into unknown territory, to test our beliefs and assumptions and knowledge on the laboratory of the page. The actual facts of the world are by turns remarkable, fascinating, troubling, frightening, and ennobling, and we honor them by writing factually, by writing fiction that creates scenarios in which those facts fuel drama or that explores alternatives to those facts, or by using the language of poetry to celebrate those facts in ways that can be uplifting, troubling, inspiring, challenging, and beautiful. And in ways that always enlarge the reader's vision of the world.

There is one important caveat: Research is an exciting and even seductive process. Indeed, one of the chief dangers is to fall into the temptation of continuing a line of research forever, never getting around to the actual writing of the creative piece. But among the many temptations available to the writer, it is probably the most useful, that creative tension between the urge to find out and the urgent need to disclose the discovery to the reader. Court that temptation, and then resist it.

LOOKING OUTWARD

The process of research begins with the act of lifting up your eyes and looking out at the world, of paying attention and noticing, of listening alertly, of practicing the habit of inquiry and investigation of common things that leads to uncommon discoveries. There are no boring facts—not once you learn to decode them. Remember: you do not begin in blank ignorance but with a formidable well of knowledge and experience waiting to be brought to bear on your project. And while it is true that much of what we do and know has little direct relevance to many of the projects we pursue, it's also true that pretty much everything we do in life, as well as everything we take the trouble to learn, somehow traces back to our governing passions, which are rooted in our identity—both the one we inherited (race, gender, ethnicity, age, family background) and the one we have cultivated (education, political philosophy, religion, taste, etc.).

So a useful first step calls for a little directed daydreaming—taking a kind of mental and emotional inventory of just who you are, what skills you possess, what experiences you have had, and how they might be linked to the project at hand. Sometimes the connections are obvious: you were given up for adoption as an infant, and for years you have longed to know who your birth mother is, what kind of family and background you sprang from. So it's no great stretch to understand your drive to pursue this story, to settle pressing questions of identity and origin. Or you were a competitive swimmer whose best memories include the bond between coach and athlete, and you feel powerfully drawn to put that experience into words—especially since you yourself are now a coach. In both cases, the writer has discovered not just motivating passions but also expertise: the first writer is an expert on being adopted, the second on what it's like to be on both sides of the athlete-coach relationship.

Other times the connection is hiding in plain sight—hidden from you, but perhaps obvious to anyone looking over your shoulder. You find yourself drawn to writing about an order of Catholic nuns, and

it's clear to someone who knows you well that it's not religion or vow of chastity and poverty that have captured your imagination but the ideal of a community of shared values, the support of strong, humane, like-minded women for each other—because you grew up in a world of estranged brothers and a widowed father. And there are of course the projects that capture us heart and soul for no reason we can define until well into the work—maybe even after the work has been completed. Sometimes we never actually get to the bottom of our fascination, but we are forced to recognize it and reckon with it in the future.

The ethic informing every sentence of this book is simple: Don't write what you already know—write what you passionately want to find out about. This doesn't mean you must be wholly ignorant of a subject. On the contrary, the very fact that it intrigues you is a sign that you already know something about it—maybe even a lot. So what do you want to find out about? You haven't even begun researching—you're just daydreaming the thing into life, sneaking up on it before announcing yourself. Even so, you are starting with imagination, the key to everything.

Prompt #1: "See and Also Observe." Go through a familiar routine (drive to work, morning breakfast, interaction with friends). Notice at least three new things. Write them down, mull them over, and then write a couple of sentences about what thoughts these new facts inspire.

Prompt #2: "Personal Inventory." For a project you are considering, inventory your skills and experience, and list ten assets that can help you in your research. Then list ten potential drawbacks or obstacles from that same inventory. Next, identify ways in which the items on the first list can help you overcome the ones on the second.

Prompt #3: "Beyond a Shadow of a Doubt." Choose a "fact" and devise a way to prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt. A fact can be defined as any material element of a narrative—a detail, an action, an event,

spoken words, a piece of environmental or historical or personal context, and so on. This fact should have three qualities:

- 1. It is not trivial but rather matters to your larger project. It may be that a seemingly trivial fact—for example, the color of a woman's hat—takes on significance in a specific context, such as a murder trial, and if so this kind of fact is fair game.
- 2. It is not conveniently documented in the public domain. That is, it did not occur in the light of public scrutiny, on audio- or videotape, or in some other manner that leaves no doubt about the essential nature of the fact. Remember that a fact can occur in front of many witnesses, including technologically advanced monitors, and still be in dispute.
- 3. It was not witnessed personally by you.