

The New York Times

Excerpts from

Writers

[on Writing]

Introduction by John Darnton

Original Essays by

Saul Bellow • Carl Hiaasen • Barbara Kingsolver

Joyce Carol Oates • Scott Turow

CONTENTS

Introduction <i>by John Darnton</i>	xi
Hidden Within Technology's Empire, A Republic of Letters <i>by Saul Bellow</i>	1
Real Life, That Bizarre and Brazen Plagiarist <i>by Carl Hiaasen</i>	5
A Forbidden Territory Familiar to All <i>by Barbara Kingsolver</i>	8
To Invigorate Literary Mind, Start Moving Literary Feet <i>by Joyce Carol Oates</i>	12
An Odyssey That Started With 'Ulysses' <i>by Scott Turow</i>	16

Experience Irreverence in an Age of Reverence



Tune in to a conversation
between Peter Jennings of ABC's
"World News Tonight" and Jon
Stewart of Comedy Central's
"The Daily Show." You don't
want to miss this thoughtful,
provocative and very funny

discussion on news and satire in today's world. Recorded live at our
Arts & Leisure Weekend in January.

View as streaming video or download to your computer.

To order or for more information, visit

nytimes.com/criticschoice

expect the world®
The New York Times
nytimes.com

Introduction

John Darnton

I got the idea for the *Writers on Writing* series shortly after I decided to become –of all things– a writer. Actually, to be a stickler about it, I didn’t really *decide* to become a writer. As with many of life’s intriguing surprises, the decisions sort of crept up on me and made itself.

I had been thirty years in the newspaper business (where I still am). Much to that time had been spent abroad, covering Africa, Europe (East and West) and the Middle East. During that time I tried to craft my stories in what I thought of as writerly way, with plenty of what the foreign desk would call “color”. But despite the fact that I sent hundreds of thousands of words halfway around the world by every conceivable means, and despite the fact that those words were presented in configurations called *stories*, I didn’t conceive of myself as a *writer*. Like most foreign correspondents, I prided myself on getting the facts in a difficult situation, not on how those facts were arranged. Nor did I object when we called ourselves “hacks”, the self-denigrating term of preference, though in our heart of hearts when we said it, we didn’t believe it. (If you ever want to reach a report with a compliment, don’t tell him that he dug out all the facts or presented them fairly; tell him he writes brilliantly and then you’ll see his chest swell). Once I was invited to a writers’ workshop in Vermont and I experienced deep ambivalence: I was pleased at being on a panel with writers, but I couldn’t help feeling like a impostor.

I began a novel, *Neanderthal*, during a stint as an editor in the New York office when I had some time on my hands. At first it was a diversion. I had read an article with some new information about those fascinating, extinct relatives of ours and I thought it would be fun to imagine a little band of them still existing in today’s world and to bring them into conflict with our own devious, predatory tribe. I lathered the story with a lot of science, as accurate as I could make it, and so what I was working on, while technically a novel, was really commercial fiction. That’s the term for a book that sells, and it’s easier to do because you don’t have to worry about being Faulkner every time you face a blank screen.

Soon I discovered a little gimmick. One day I complained to a friend and author, a fellow “hack” from the Nairobi press corps, that the work was going slowly, that I had been writing only a thousand words a day. He sat up like a bolt, downed his scotch and peered at me through a cloud of cigarette smoke. “One thousand words a day! That’s terrific! Don’t you realize? That’s thirty thousand words a month. Three, four months and you’ve got a book.” I did the math; he was right. I set my computer so that I could knock off the moment I hit a thousand words. The device worked. A momentous task had been cut down to bite sizes. No longer was laboring to climb a mountain while staring at the snow-covered peak far above; instead I was climbing a single slope day after day until one day I would arrive at the summit. And one day I did. I began to feel like Molière’s

Bourgeois Gentleman learning that he has been speaking prose all along. The thought struck me that maybe I am a writer after all.

So, I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to commission a series by writers to let them talk about their craft? Maybe they would have similar tricks to impart. Maybe they could let some daylight in upon the magic. Where do they get their ideas? Or perhaps they should talk about literature. Or about reading—say, the general consensus that we are sinking into the abyss of an illiterate society. I drew up a list of writers that I wanted most to hear from (which was not the same, I was to learn, as a list of writers who might want to hear from me). I threw in some big names: Updike, Bellow, Doctorow. I added other names, younger writers, experimenters, radicals, miscreants. I went to PEN gatherings and moved from table to table signing up people like a Hollywood agent.

I learned a number of things. Not all writers want to talk about what they do. A lot of them do not meet deadlines. And unlike reporters, they do not accept assignments gracefully—they actually have to *want* to do it. Beware of interrupting a writer in the middle of his working day: if he appears to want to remain on the line long after you do, that's not a good sign. Some are perfectionists (one was deeply miffed by a misplaced comma). Some are vain (one cut his piece by three hundred words to make room for a picture). And all of them are human in one respect: they wanted to hear, right away, what you thought of their work.

The series has been exceedingly popular. One reason might be that the writing stands above the ordinary fare of a daily newspaper. Another is probably might be that the writing stands above the ordinary fare of a daily newspaper. Another is probably the subjects, which tend toward the personal and wander over the private range of the imagination. And a third reason, I believe, is that many people have a secret urge to become writers themselves. All of our lives are stories. How many times have you heard someone say that she has a good book inside her, if only she could get it out?

Which reminds me of a saucy remark from a friend of my son's, an English teenager smitten with premature wit. Lent my first book for a plane ride home, he sent back a postcard in a hand that fairly chuckled: "I thought your book was good", he wrote. "They say everyone has a great book inside him. I look forward to yours."

But I digress. And my computer informs me that I have stayed too long—by twenty-six words.

Hidden Within Technology's Empire, a Republic of Letters

Saul Bellow

When I was a boy “discovering literature”, I used to think how wonderful it would be if every other person on the street were familiar with Proust and Joyce or T. E. Lawrence or Pasternak and Kafka. Later I learned how refractory to high culture the democratic masses were. Lincoln as a young frontiersman read Plutarch, Shakespeare and the Bible. But then he was Lincoln.

Later when I was traveling in the Midwest by car, bus and train, I regularly visited small-town libraries and found that readers in Keokuk, Iowa, or Benton Harbor, Mich., were checking out Proust and Joyce and even Svevo and Andrei Biely. D. H. Lawrence was also a favorite. And sometimes I remembered that God was willing to spare Sodom for the sake of 10 of the righteous. Not that Keokuk was anything like wicked Sodom, or that Proust's Charlus would have been tempted to settle in Benton Harbor, Mich. I seem to have had a persistent democratic desire to find evidences of high culture in the most unlikely places.

For many decades now I have been a fiction writer, and from the first I was aware that mine was a questionable occupation. In the 1930's an elderly neighbor in Chicago told me that he wrote fiction for the pulps. “The people on the block wonder why I don't go to a job, and I'm seen puttering around, trimming the bushes or painting a fence instead of working in a factory. But I'm a writer. I sell to Argosy and Doc Savage,” he said with a certain gloom. “They wouldn't call that a trade.” Probably he noticed that I was a bookish boy, likely to sympathize with him, and perhaps he was trying to warn me to avoid being unlike others. But it was too late for that.

From the first, too, I had been warned that the novel was at the point of death, that like the walled city or the crossbow, it was a thing of the past. And no one likes to be at odds with history. Oswald Spengler, one of the most widely read authors of the early 30's, taught that our tired old civilization was very nearly finished. His advice to the young was to avoid literature and the arts and to embrace mechanization and become engineers.

In refusing to be obsolete, you challenged and defied the evolutionist historians. I had great respect for Spengler in my youth, but even then I couldn't accept his conclusions, and (with respect and admiration) I mentally told him to get lost.

Sixty years later, in a recent issue of *The Wall Street Journal*, I come upon the old Spenglerian argument in a contemporary form. Terry Teachout, unlike Spengler, does not dump paralyzing mountains of historical theory upon us, but there are signs that he has weighed, sifted and pondered the evidence.

He speaks of our “atomized culture,” and his is a responsible, up-to-date and carefully considered opinion. He speaks of “art forms as technologies.” He tells us that movies will soon be “downloadable”—that is, transferable from one computer to the memory of another device—and predicts that films will soon be marketed like books. He predicts that the near-magical powers of technology are bringing us to the threshold of a new age and concludes, “Once this happens, my guess is that the independent movie will replace the novel as the principal vehicle for serious storytelling in the 21st century.”

In support of this argument, Mr. Teachout cites the ominous drop in the volume of book sales and the great increase in movie attendance: “For Americans under the age of 30, film has replaced the novel as the dominant mode of artistic expression.” To this Mr. Teachout adds that popular novelists like Tom Clancy and Stephen King “top out at around a million copies per book,” and notes, “The final episode of NBC’s ‘Cheers,’ by contrast, was seen by 42 million people.”

On majoritarian grounds, the movies win. “The power of novels to shape the national conversation has declined,” says Mr. Teachout. But I am not at all certain that in their day “*Moby-Dick*” or “*The Scarlet Letter*” had any considerable influence on “the national conversation.” In the mid-19th century it was “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” that impressed the great public. “*Moby-Dick*” was a small-public novel.

The literary masterpieces of the 20th century were for the most part the work of novelists who had no large public in mind. The novels of Proust and Joyce were written in a cultural twilight and were not intended to be read under the blaze and dazzle of popularity.

Mr. Teachout’s article in *The Journal* follows the path generally taken by observers whose aim is to discover a trend. “According to one recent study 55 percent of Americans spend less than 30 minutes reading anything at all. . . . It may even be that movies have superseded novels not because Americans have grown dumber but because the novel is an obsolete artistic technology.”

“We are not accustomed to thinking of art forms as technologies,” he says, “but that is what they are, which means they have been rendered moribund by new technical developments.”

Together with this emphasis on technics that attracts the scientific-minded young, there are other preferences discernible: It is better to do as a majority of your contemporaries are doing, better to be one of millions viewing a film than one of mere thousands reading a book. Moreover, the reader reads in solitude, whereas the viewer belongs to a great majority; he has powers of numerosity as well as the powers of mechanization. Add to this the importance of avoiding technological obsolescence and the attraction of feeling that technics will decide questions for us more dependably than the thinking of an individual, no matter how distinctive he may be.

John Cheever told me long ago that it was his readers who kept him going, people from every part of the country who had written to him. When he was at work, he was aware of these readers and

correspondents in the woods beyond the lawn. "If I couldn't picture them, I'd be sunk," he said. And the novelist Wright Morris, urging me to get an electric typewriter, said that he seldom turned his machine off. "When I'm not writing, I listen to the electricity," he said. "It keeps me company. We have conversations."

I wonder how Mr. Teachout might square such idiosyncrasies with his "art forms as technologies." Perhaps he would argue that these two writers had somehow isolated themselves from "broad-based cultural influence." Mr. Teachout has at least one laudable purpose: He thinks that he sees a way to bring together the Great Public of the movies with the Small Public of the highbrows. He is, however, interested in millions: millions of dollars, millions of readers, millions of viewers.

The one thing "everybody" does is go to the movies, Mr. Teachout says. How right he is.

Back in the 20's children between the ages of 8 and 12 lined up on Saturdays to buy their nickel tickets to see the crisis of last Saturday resolved. The heroine was untied in a matter of seconds just before the locomotive would have crushed her. Then came a new episode; and after that the newsreel and "Our Gang." Finally there was a western with Tom Mix, or a Janet Gaynor picture about a young bride and her husband blissful in the attic, or Gloria Swanson and Theda Bara or Wallace Beery or Adolphe Menjou or Marie Dressler. And of course there was Charlie Chaplin in "The Gold Rush," and from "The Gold Rush" it was only one step to the stories of Jack London.

There was no rivalry then between the viewer and the reader. Nobody supervised our reading. We were on our own. We civilized ourselves. We found or made a mental and imaginative life. Because we could read, we learned also to write. It did not confuse me to see "Treasure Island" in the movies and then read the book. There was no competition for our attention.

One of the more attractive oddities of the United States is that our minorities are so numerous, so huge. A minority of millions is not at all unusual. But there are in fact millions of literate Americans in a state of separation from others of their kind. They are, if you like, the readers of Cheever, a crowd of them too large to be hidden in the woods. Departments of literature across the country have not succeeded in alienating them from books, works old and new. My friend Keith Botsford and I felt strongly that if the woods were filled with readers gone astray, among those readers there were probably writers as well.

To learn in detail of their existence you have only to publish a magazine like The Republic of Letters. Given encouragement, unknown writers, formerly without hope, materialize. One early reader wrote that our paper, "with its contents so fresh, person-to-person," was "real, non-synthetic, undistracting." Noting that there were no ads, she asked, "Is it possible, can it last?" and called it "an antidote to the shrinking of the human being in every one of us." And toward the end of her letter our correspondent added, "It behooves the elder generation to come up with reminders of who we used to be and need to be."

This is what Keith Botsford and I had hoped that our "tabloid for literates" would be. And for two years it has been just that. We are a pair of utopian codgers who feel we have a duty to literature. I hope we are not like those humane do-gooders who, when the horse was vanishing, still donated troughs in City Hall Square for thirsty nags.

We have no way of guessing how many independent, self-initiated connoisseurs and lovers of literature have survived in remote corners of the country. The little evidence we have suggests that they are glad to find us, they are grateful. They want more than they are getting. Ingenious technology has failed to give them what they so badly need.

Real Life, That Bizarre And Brazen Plagiarist

Carl Hiaasen

One time I had to kill this guy.

It was in a novel, but that didn't make it easy. My books are supposed to be funny, so even death should be carried out with a twist of wit. The pressure is wicked.

The bad guy in question, Pedro by name, was a sadistic security guard at a low-budget amusement park in the Florida Keys. Pedro was so addicted to anabolic steroids that he hooked himself to a rolling intravenous rig, which he dragged behind him on his rounds.

Two-thirds of the way through the novel, which was called "Native Tongue," I decided it was time to get rid of Pedro—he was growing nastier by the page and, worse, beginning to distract from the heroics of my protagonist. So Pedro had to go. But how to do the deed?

Shooting him would be simple enough; overdosing him, tidy and quick. But I feared that readers wouldn't be satisfied. Heck, I wouldn't be satisfied. That's how detestable Pedro was: his demise had to be something special.

In the end I did what satirists throughout the ages have done: I poached from current events and embellished to suit my plot.

At the time I was doing the book, a peculiar controversy was brewing about captive bottlenose dolphins in Florida, where I live. Local theme parks had begun charging tourists \$50 or more to frolic in the tanks with the sleek, acrobatic sea mammals.

Some of the dolphins, it turned out, had their own ideas of fun. They greeted the splashy human intruders with what marine biologists discreetly termed "high-risk activity." Often that activity was aggressively sexual, leaving the tourists with a truly unforgettable vacation experience.

I had written of this phenomenon in my day job as a columnist for The Miami Herald. Like so many true Florida stories, this one had been worth clipping for future reference.

It proved bad news for Pedro, my fictional villain. As luck would have it, the sleazy amusement park in my novel featured a rogue, untrainable cousin of Flipper.

How could I resist? A dark night, a frantic struggle on the catwalk, the dope-addled thug tumbles into the tank and . . . is promptly romanced to death by Dickie the Dolphin.

So that's how I bumped off the evil security guard. Readers seemed to agree that justice was well served, though many of them thought I made up the bit about the randy cetacean.

(I didn't. For proof, see "Quantitative Behavioral Study of Bottlenose Dolphins in Swim-With-the-Dolphins Programs in the United States," published in the October 1995 issue of *Marine Mammal Science*.)

Every writer scrounges for inspiration in different places, and there's no shame in raiding the headlines. It's necessary, in fact, when attempting contemporary satire. Sharp-edged humor relies on topical reference points.

Unfortunately for novelists, real life is getting way too funny and far-fetched. It's especially true in Miami, where the daily news seems to be scripted by David Lynch. Fact is routinely more fantastic than fiction.

Consider the fellow who was found with an adult alligator in his bed, and numerous tooth-sized wounds on his torso. Over the punctured man's protests, game wardens whisked the befuddled reptile to safety.

Naturally a lawsuit and protracted custody battle followed. After two years an appellate court finally decided in favor of the gator and against his smitten captor. Although I've saved the newspaper clipping ("Court: Gators in bed is bad idea"), I doubt I'll ever use the story in a novel. It cannot be improved upon.

These days writers of satire must be exceptionally choosy about their material, and their targets. Even then, true life is inclined to trump you.

Once I wrote a book called "Strip Tease," in which a United States congressman becomes droolingly infatuated with an exotic dancer. The premise had been inspired partly by my own congressman, J. Herbert Burke, who was arrested in 1978 for behaving badly at a topless club in Fort Lauderdale.

In real life Mr. Burke, a Republican, simply had gotten drunk and grabby with the dancers. In the novel my fictional congressman, a Democrat, is deranged with lust. (The movie role was given to Burt Reynolds, a choice that surely would have delighted the late and not-so-dashing Mr. Burke).

One night in 1996, shortly before the film version of "Strip Tease" was released, a man named Kendall B. Coffey purchased a \$900 bottle of Champagne and led a dancer to a private salon in a South Dade adult club called Lipstik.

The dancer, whose stage name was Tiffany, said Mr. Coffey drank too much bubbly and, after a struggle, chomped down on her arm. The incident wouldn't have made the news but for the fact that Mr. Coffey was the United States attorney for the Southern District of Florida, one of the nation's most powerful prosecutors. He made no secret of his importance as bouncers firmly escorted him from the strip joint.

Mr. Coffey declined to discuss what had happened but abruptly resigned as United States attorney and went into private practice. The dancer went on national television to display the bite marks. Later her husband called to see if I wanted to write a book about her shocking experience.

I told him I already had. It wasn't the first time I felt plagiarized by real life, and it isn't likely to be the last.

Some novelists say they envy those of us who live in South Florida because our source material is so wondrously weird. True enough, but the toll on our imaginations is draining. On many days fiction seems like a futile mission.

Pilfering from the news is no longer enough; now we must compete with it. A prime example is the strange saga of little Elian Gonzalez, which rips off elements of Tom Wolfe, Kurt Vonnegut, even Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

A young Cuban boy sets off for the United States in a small boat with his mother and other refugees. The boat sinks, his mother perishes, and the child is found adrift: protected, relatives would later claim, by friendly (but not overly friendly) dolphins.

The boy is embraced by Miami's exile community as a sort of anti-Castro messiah, graced by mystical apparitions of the Virgin Mary and even Diane Sawyer, standing on her head. Meanwhile back in Havana the child is hailed as a lost soldier of the Revolution, a mini-Che Guevara beaming at the throngs from T-shirts and highway billboards.

Elian's father wants him back in Cuba. The relatives in Miami won't let him go. Demonstrators surround the house and vow to block any attempt to retrieve the child, though he is accepting visits from Gloria Estefan, Andy Garcia and other celebrities. As the tense city sleeps, the boy is snatched by federal agents and flown to his father. The next day from the Miami camp: "second Elian" theory. . . .

I can't tell you how often I get asked if Elian will turn up in my next book. The challenge is too daunting, and not because the real-life drama defies satire. It is satire.

Just look who's railing at the press conference: one of the dozen high-priced lawyers hired to prevent Elian's father from regaining custody. Why, it's none other than Kendall B. Coffey, the aforementioned ex-United States attorney and alleged stripper biter!

How deliciously twisted and surreal.

Once it might have made a grand scene in a funny novel, but not now. It's too true to be good.

A Forbidden Territory Familiar to All

Barbara Kingsolver

Reader, hear my confession: I'm writing an unchaste novel. It's a little shocking, even to me. In my previous books I've mostly written about sex by means of the space break. One reviewer claimed I'd written the shortest sex scene in the English language. I know the scene he meant; the action turns when one character notices a cellophane crackle in the other's shirt pocket and declares that if he has a condom in there, this is her lucky day. The scene then proceeds, in its entirety:

He did. It was. (Space break!)

I think my readers rely on me for a certain reserve, judging from the college course adoptions and the mothers who say they've shared my books with their daughters. They may be in for a surprise this time around. Not that the sex is gratuitous, I keep telling myself. This novel is about life, in a biological sense: the rules that connect, divide and govern living species, including their tireless compunction to reproduce themselves.

In this tale the birds do it, the mushrooms do it, and the people do it, starting on Page 6 already. I'm having a good old time writing about it, too. I've always felt I was getting away with something marginally legal, inventing fantasies for a living. But now it seems an outright scandal. I send my kids off to school in the morning, scuttle to my office, close the door, and hoo boy, les bons temps roulent!

Now that I'm closing in on a finished draft, though, I've begun to think about the people who will soon be sitting in their homes, on airplanes and in subways with their hands on this book. Many people. My mother, for instance.

My writer-friend Nancy, a practical New Englander, offered this counsel:

"Barbara, you're in your 40's now, and you have two children. She knows that you know."

Yes, all right, she does. But what about the man from the Ag Extension Service, whom I've asked to vet my book's agricultural setting for accuracy? How do I hand this manuscript to him? And what about those English Lit teachers? I don't mind that they know I know, or that I think about it, in circumstances outside my own experience. Come on, who doesn't? Most people I know couldn't construct a good plot to save their souls, but can and do, I suspect, imagine detailed sexual scenarios complete with dialogue (if they're female) and a sense of place.

But they don't pass them around for others to read, for heaven's sake. My dread is that people will take my book for something other than literature and me for something other than a serious writer. In anxious moments I've begun combing my bookshelves for fellow offenders.

Yes, there are plenty of authors before me who have put explicitly sexual scenes into literature. There's a particularly lovely one in the center of David Guterson's "Snow Falling on Cedars," there are sweetly funny ones in John Irving, and of course we have John Updike, Philip Roth and Henry Miller. (Notice the dearth of women on this list.) Even such distinguished 18th-century gents as Ben Franklin and Jonathan Swift scored the occasional love scene in their prose.

But I was surprised, on the humid afternoon I spent pulling down books and looking for scenes that had burned themselves into my memory, to see how often they were implied situations rather than step-by-step enactments. Copious use of the space break, in other words.

The scene in "Lady Chatterley's Lover" I've remembered down the years, it turns out, was mostly invented by me, not D. H. Lawrence. (And given Lawrence's knowledge of love from the female perspective, is that any wonder?) In actual word count, if the literary novels in my bookcase accurately represent human experience, it looks as if people spend roughly half their time in intelligent dialogue about the meaning of their lives, and 1 percent of it practicing or contemplating coition.

Excuse me, but I don't think so.

Why should literary authors shy away from something so important? Nobody else does. If we calibrated human experience on the basis of television, magazine covers and billboards, we would have to conclude that humans devote more time to copulation than to sleeping, eating and accessorizing the hot new summer look, combined. (Possibly even more than shooting one another with firearms, though that's a tough call.) Filmmakers don't risk being taken less seriously for including sexual content; in fact, they may risk it if they don't.

But serious literature seems to be looking the other way, ready to take on anything else, with impunity. Myself, I've written about every awful thing from the death of a child to the morality of political assassination, and I've never felt fainthearted before. What is it about describing acts of love that makes me go pale? There is, of course, the claim that women who make a public show of being acquainted with sexuality are expressing deviance, but that's also said about women who make a show of knowing anything, and I can't imagine being daunted by such nonsense.

For decent folk of any gender, the official and legal position of our culture is that sex takes place in private, and that's surely part of the problem. Private things—newfound love, family disagreements and spiritual faith, to name a few—can quickly become banal or irritating when moved into the public arena. But new love, family squabbles and spirituality are rich ground for literature when they're handled with care. Writers don't avoid them on grounds of privacy, but rather take it as duty to draw insights from personal things and render them universal. Nothing could be more secret, after all, than the inside of another person's mind, and that is just where a novel takes us, usually from Page 1. No subject is too private for good fiction if it can be made beautiful and enlightening.

That may be the rub right there. Making it beautiful is no small trick. The language of coition has been stolen, or rather, I think, it has been divvied up like chips in a poker game among pornography, consumerism and the medical profession. None of these players are concerned with aesthetics, so the linguistic chips have become unpretty by association. “Vagina” is fatally paired with “speculum.” Any word you can name for the male sex organ or its, um, movement seems to be the property of Larry Flynt. Even a perfectly serviceable word like “nut,” when uttered by an adult, causes paroxysms in sixth-grade boys.

My word processing program’s thesaurus has washed its hands of the matter: it eschews any word remotely associated with making love. “Coitus,” for example, claims to be NOT FOUND, and the program coyly suggests as the nearest alternative “coincide with?” It also pleads ignorant on “penis” and suggests “pen friend.” A writer in work-avoidance mode could amuse herself all day.

I realize linguistic aesthetics may not be Microsoft’s concern here; more likely it’s mothers. Roget’s does much better, reinforcing my conviction that the book is mightier (or at least braver) than the computer. My St. Martin’s Roget’s Thesaurus obligingly offers up 15 synonyms for coition—though some are dubious, like “couplement”—and an impressive 28 descriptors for genitalia, though again some of these are obscure. In a scene where lingam meets yoni, I’m not even sure who I’m rooting for.

Nevertheless, the language is ours for the taking. Fiction writers have found elegant ways to describe life on other planets, or in a rabbit warren, or an elephant tribe, inventing the language they needed to navigate passages previously uncharted by our tongue. We don’t normally call off the game on account of linguistic handicaps. When it comes to the couplement of yoni, I think the real handicap is a cultural one.

We live in a strange land where marketers can display teenage models in the receptive lordotic posture (look it up) to sell jeans or liquor, but the basics of human procreation can’t be discussed in a middle-school science class without sparking parental ire. The same is true for evolution, incidentally, and I think the reason is the same: our tradition is to deny, for all we’re worth, that we’re in any way connected with the rest of life on earth. We don’t come from it, we’re not part of it, we own it.

It is deeply threatening to our ideology, at the corporate and theological levels, to admit we’re constrained by the laws of biology. Sex is the ultimate animal necessity. We can’t get rid of it. The harder we try to deny it official status, the more it asserts itself in banal, embarrassing ways. And so here we are, modern Americans with our heads soaked in frank sexual imagery and our feet planted in our Puritanical heritage, and any novelist with something to say about procreation or the lordotic posture has to negotiate that territory. Great sex is more rare in art than in life because it’s harder to do.

To write about sex at all, we must first face down the polite pretense that it doesn’t really matter to us and acknowledge that in the grand scheme of things, nothing could matter more. In the quiet of our writing rooms we have to corral the beast and find a way to tell of its terror and beauty. We must own up to its gravity. We also must accept an uncomfortable intimacy with our readers in the admission that, yes, we’ve both done this. We must warn our mothers before the book comes out. We must accept the economic reality that this one won’t make the core English Lit curriculum.

Still, in spite of everything, I'm determined to write about the biological exigencies of human life, and where can I start the journey except through this mined harbor? It's a risk I'll have to take.

Reader, don't blush. I know you know.

To Invigorate Literary Mind, Start Moving Literary Feet

Joyce Carol Oates

Running! If there's any activity happier, more exhilarating, more nourishing to the imagination, I can't think what it might be. In running the mind flies with the body; the mysterious efflorescence of language seems to pulse in the brain, in rhythm with our feet and the swinging of our arms. Ideally, the runner who's a writer is running through the land- and cityscapes of her fiction, like a ghost in a real setting.

There must be some analogue between running and dreaming. The dreaming mind is usually bodiless, has peculiar powers of locomotion and, in my experience at least, often runs or glides or "flies" along the ground or in the air. (Leaving aside the blunt, deflating theory that dreams are merely compensatory: you fly in sleep because in life you crawl, barely; you're soaring above others in sleep because in life others soar above you.)

Possibly these fairy-tale feats of locomotion are atavistic remnants, the hallucinatory memory of a distant ancestor for whom the physical being, charged with adrenaline in emergency situations, was indistinguishable from the spiritual or intellectual. In running, "spirit" seems to pervade the body; as musicians experience the uncanny phenomenon of tissue memory in their fingertips, so the runner seems to experience in feet, lungs, quickened heartbeat, an extension of the imagining self.

The structural problems I set for myself in writing, in a long, snarled, frustrating and sometimes despairing morning of work, for instance, I can usually unsnarl by running in the afternoon.

On days when I can't run, I don't feel "myself"; and whoever the "self" is I feel, I don't like nearly so much as the other. And the writing remains snarled in endless revisions.

Writers and poets are famous for loving to be in motion. If not running, hiking; if not hiking, walking. (Walking, even fast, is a poor second to running, as all runners know, what we'll resort to when our knees go. But at least it's an option.)

The English Romantic poets were clearly inspired by their long walks, in all weather: Wordsworth and Coleridge in the idyllic Lake District, for instance; Shelley ("I always go until I am stopped and I never am stopped") in his four intense years in Italy. The New England Transcendentalists, most famously Henry David Thoreau, were ceaseless walkers; Thoreau boasted of having "traveled much

in Concord,” and in his eloquent essay “Walking” acknowledged that he had to spend more than four hours out of doors daily, in motion; otherwise he felt “as if I had some sin to be atoned for.”

My favorite prose on the subject is Charles Dickens’s “Night Walks,” which he wrote some years after having suffered extreme insomnia that propelled him out into the London streets at night. Written with Dickens’s usual brilliance, this haunting essay seems to hint at more than its words reveal. He associates his terrible night restlessness with what he calls “houselessness”: under a compulsion to walk and walk and walk in the darkness and pattering rain. (No one has captured the romance of desolation, the ecstasy of near-madness, more forcibly than Dickens, so wrongly interpreted as a dispenser of popular, softhearted tales.)

It isn’t surprising that Walt Whitman should have tramped impressive distances, for you can feel the pulse beat of the walker in his slightly breathless, incantatory poems. But it may be surprising to learn that Henry James, whose prose style more resembles the fussy intricacies of crocheting than the fluidity of movement, also loved to walk for miles in London.

I, too, walked (and ran) for miles in London years ago. Much of it in Hyde Park. Regardless of weather. Living for a sabbatical year with my husband, an English professor, in a corner of Mayfair overlooking Speakers’ Corner, I was so afflicted with homesickness for America, and for Detroit, I ran compulsively; not as a respite for the intensity of writing but as a function of writing.

As I ran, I was running in Detroit, envisioning the city’s parks and streets, avenues and expressways, with such eidetic clarity I had only to transcribe them when I returned to our flat, recreating Detroit in my novel “Do With Me What You Will” as faithfully as I’d recreated Detroit in “Them” when I was living there.

What a curious experience! Without the bouts of running, I don’t believe I could have written the novel; yet how perverse, one thinks, to be living in one of the world’s most beautiful cities, London, and to be dreaming of one of the world’s most problematic cities, Detroit. But of course, as no one has yet remarked in this diverse and idiosyncratic series, *Writers on Writing*, writers are crazy.

Each of us, we like to think, in her own inimitable way.

Both running and writing are highly addictive activities; both are, for me, inextricably bound up with consciousness. I can’t recall a time when I wasn’t running, and I can’t recall a time when I wasn’t writing.

(Before I could write what might be called human words in the English language, I eagerly emulated grown-ups’ handwriting in pencil scribbles. My first “novels”—which I’m afraid my loving parents still have, in a trunk or a drawer on our old farm property in Millersport, N.Y.—were tablets of inspired scribbles illustrated by line drawings of chickens, horses and upright cats. For I had not yet mastered the trickier human form, as I was years from mastering human psychology.)

My earliest outdoor memories have to do with the special solitude of running or hiking in our pear and apple orchards, through fields of wind-rustling corn towering over my head, along farmers’ lanes and on bluffs above the Tonawanda Creek. Through childhood I hiked, roamed, tirelessly explored the countryside: neighboring farms, a treasure trove of old barns, abandoned houses and

forbidden properties of all kinds, some of them presumably dangerous, like cisterns and wells covered with loose boards.

These activities are intimately bound up with storytelling, for always there's a ghost-self, a "fictitious" self, in such settings. For this reason I believe that any form of art is a species of exploration and transgression. (I never saw a "No Trespassing" sign that wasn't a summons to my rebellious blood. Such signs, dutifully posted on trees and fence railings, might as well cry, "Come Right In!")

To write is to invade another's space, if only to memorialize it. To write is to invite angry censure from those who don't write, or who don't write in quite the way you do, for whom you may seem a threat. Art by its nature is a transgressive act, and artists must accept being punished for it. The more original and unsettling their art, the more devastating the punishment.

If writing involves punishment, at least for some of us, the act of running even in adulthood can evoke painful memories of having been, long ago, as children, chased by tormentors. (Is there any adult who hasn't such memories? Are there any adult women who have not been, in one way or another, sexually molested or threatened?) That adrenaline rush, like an injection to the heart!

I attended a one-room country schoolhouse in which eight very disparate grades were taught by a single overworked woman. The teasing, pummeling, pinching, punching, mauling, kicking and verbal abuse that surrounded the relative sanctuary of the schoolhouse simply had to be endured, for in those days there were no protective laws against such mistreatment. This was a laissez-faire era in which a man might beat the daylights out of his wife and children, and the police would rarely intervene except in cases of serious injury or death.

Often when I'm running in the most idyllic landscapes, I'm reminded of the panicked childhood running of decades ago. I was one of those luckless children without older brothers or sisters to protect her against the systematic cruelty of older classmates, thus fair game. I don't believe I was singled out (because my grades were high, for instance), and I came to see years later that such abuse is generic, not personal. It must prevail through the species; it allows us insight into the experiences of others, a sense of what a more enduring panic, entrapment, suffering and despair must be truly like. Sexual abuse seems to us the most repellent kind of abuse, and it's certainly the abuse that nourishes a palliative amnesia.

Beyond the lines of printed words in my books are the settings in which the books were imagined and without which the books could not exist. Sometime in 1985, for instance, running along the Delaware River south of Yardley, Pa., I glanced up and saw the ruins of a railroad bridge and experienced in a flash such a vivid, visceral memory of crossing a footbridge beside a similar railroad trestle high above the Erie Canal in Lockport, N.Y., when I was 12 to 14 years old, that I saw the possibility of a novel. This would become "You Must Remember This," set in a mythical upstate New York city very like the original.

Yet often the reverse occurs: I find myself running in a place so intriguing to me, amid houses, or the backs of houses, so mysterious, I'm fated to write about these sights, to bring them to life (as it's said) in fiction. I'm a writer absolutely mesmerized by places; much of my writing is a way of

assuaging homesickness, and the settings my characters inhabit are crucial to me as the characters themselves. I couldn't write even a very short story without vividly "seeing" what its characters see.

Stories come to us as wraiths requiring precise embodiments. Running seems to allow me, ideally, an expanded consciousness in which I can envision what I'm writing as a film or a dream. I rarely invent at the typewriter but recall what I've experienced. I don't use a word processor but write in longhand, at considerable length. (Again, I know: writers are crazy.)

By the time I come to type out my writing formally, I've envisioned it repeatedly. I've never thought of writing as the mere arrangement of words on the page but as the attempted embodiment of a vision: a complex of emotions, raw experience.

The effort of memorable art is to evoke in the reader or spectator emotions appropriate to that effort. Running is a meditation; more practicably it allows me to scroll through, in my mind's eye, the pages I've just written, proofreading for errors and improvements.

My method is one of continuous revision. While writing a long novel, every day I loop back to earlier sections to rewrite, in order to maintain a consistent, fluid voice. When I write the final two or three chapters of a novel, I write them simultaneously with the rewriting of the opening, so that, ideally at least, the novel is like a river uniformly flowing, each passage concurrent with all the others.

My most recent novel is 1,200 finished manuscript pages, which means many more typed-out pages, and how many miles of running, I dare not guess!

Dreams may be temporary flights into madness that, by some law of neurophysiology unclear to us, keep us from actual madness. So, too, the twin activities of running and writing keep the writer reasonably sane and with the hope, however illusory and temporary, of control.

An Odyssey That Started With ‘Ulysses’

Scott Turow

At the age of 18, after my freshman year in college, I worked as a mailman. This was merely a summer job. My life’s calling, I had decided, was to be a novelist, and late at night I was already toiling on my first novel.

One of the glories of postal employment in those days was that once carriers learned their routes, they could deliver the mail in far less than the five hours allotted. By longstanding agreement—explained to me in a most emphatic and furtive way by a colleague my first week—mail carriers who finished early did not return to the post office until the end of the day.

Since the public library was the only air-conditioned public building, even in that affluent suburban town, I spent my free time there. And inasmuch as I wanted to be a novelist, I decided to read James Joyce’s “Ulysses.”

By then I had read Joyce’s magnificent first novel, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,” and I wanted to be a novelist just like him. In homage to Joyce’s embroidery from the stuff of the Greek myths, I’d called my first novel “Dithyramb,” the name of a Bacchic dance whose relevance was entirely elusive, even then, to my story of two teenage runaways from Chicago who witness a murder.

As for “Ulysses,” even as a freshman I’d been taught that it was hands down the best novel ever written. The literary god T. S. Eliot had hailed the book in 1923 as “the most important expression” of its age. “If it is not a novel, that is simply because the novel is a form which will no longer serve,” said Eliot, praising Joyce for being in advance of his time.

So for the next eight weeks I read the novel to end all novels for an hour and a half each afternoon at taxpayer expense. A number of things struck me about “Ulysses.” First, it was hard. When I finished, I was glad I’d read it, but I didn’t mind that I’d been paid by the hour to do it.

I was also troubled that the library’s single volume of “Ulysses” was there every day when I went for it, never checked out. It seemed that no one else in this well-to-do, highly educated community wanted to read the greatest novel ever written, at least not in the leisure hours of summer. I thought inevitably of the philosophical riddle with which schoolchildren were routinely teased in those days: If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, is there sound?

Thus began the questions that plagued me for years. Was “Ulysses” really a great work of literature, if almost no one read it for leisure, and if the few who dared found it so taxing? What did writers owe their audience? How easy were we supposed to make things for them? And what were we entitled to demand in return?

It was obvious that every writer, at least those who sought to publish, craved an audience. But on what terms? The modernists, for example, did not aim to be read by everybody. Their attitudes were well expressed in Eliot’s remarks about Joyce or in Ezra Pound’s declaration “Artists are the antennae of the race, but the bullet-headed many will never learn to trust their great artists.”

In the modernists’ view the writer’s job was to lead culture, to reinvent art constantly, thereby providing society with previously undiscovered insights. It did not matter if the bullet-headed didn’t understand “Ulysses,” provided the few who could change culture did.

The radical democrat in my soul who was running amok in the 60’s had a hard time buying this. Yet even I had to accept the modernists’ formulation that artists must lead. But my view was more of an I-thou relationship: the artist offers a special vision that reframes experience in a way that, although intensely personal, reverberates deeply among us all.

To lead and arouse a universal audience seemed the writer’s task, yet it was hardly clear to me how to do it. Following college I spent several years at the Creative Writing Center at Stanford University, first as a fellow and later as a lecturer. The center was roiled by intense factional rivalries that echoed much of my own turmoil.

A clutch of anti-realists, self-conscious innovators, championed the views of John Hawkes, who had once declared, “I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme.” The experimentalists reacted in horror when I contended that the ideal novel would be equally stirring to a bus driver and an English professor.

My ideas were much closer to those of my teacher, Wallace Stegner, a realist writer in the tradition of James and Dreiser, which had stressed an exacting representation of our experience in the everyday world. The realists eschewed Dickensian plot, since it depended on coincidence or the kind of odd or extreme behavior we don’t commonly witness. Despite my affinities, I was tweaked by the experimentalists’ complaints that the resulting literature was often static.

I dug through these issues in my own work, spending my years at Stanford writing a novel about a rent strike in Chicago. The book was steeped in the intricacies of real estate law, which explained in part why it, like “Dithyramb,” went unpublished.

Nonetheless, writing the book had opened me to a previously unrecognized passion for the law. I startled everyone, even myself, by abandoning my academic career in favor of law school, vowing all the same to live on as a writer. By the time I graduated, I had published “One L,” a nonfiction account of my first year at law school. But I still yearned to be a novelist, even as law school had confirmed my attraction to the life of a working lawyer and, especially, to criminal law.

I was hired as a prosecutor in the United States Attorney’s Office in Chicago. There I was astonished to find myself facing the same old questions about how to address an audience. The trial

lawyer's job and the novelist's were, in some aspects, shockingly similar. Both involved the reconstruction of experience, usually through many voices, whether they were witnesses or characters. But there the paths deviated. In this arena the universal trumped; there were no prizes for being rarefied or ahead of the times. The trial lawyer who lost the audience also inevitably lost the case.

Engaging the jury was indispensable, and again and again I received the same advice about how to do it: Tell them a good story. There were plenty of good stories told in the courtroom, vivid accounts of crimes witnessed or conspiracies joined. The jury hung in primal fascination, waiting to find out what happened next. And so did I.

Thus I suddenly saw my answer to the literary conundrum of expressing the unique for a universal audience: Tell them a good story. The practice of criminal law had set me to seething with potential themes: the fading gradations between ordinary fallibility and great evil; the mysterious passions that lead people to break the known rules; the mirage that the truth often becomes in the courtroom.

The decision to succumb to plot and to the tenacious emotional grip I felt in contemplating crime led me naturally to the mystery whose power as a storytelling form persisted despite its long-term residence in the low-rent precincts of critical esteem. I was certain that an audience's hunger to know what happened next could be abetted by some of the values of the traditional realist novel, especially psychological depth in the characters and a prose style that aimed for more than just dishing out plot.

Furthermore the supposedly timeworn conventions of genre writing seemed actually to offer an opportunity for innovation. Why not, for example, invert the traditional detective tale by having the investigator accused of the crime?

Thus was born "Presumed Innocent." I worked on that book for eight years on the morning commuter train and was staggered by its subsequent emergence as a best seller. My only goal had been finally to publish a novel. I didn't even like most best sellers, which I deemed short on imagination.

I have, frankly, learned to enjoy all the rewards of best-sellerdom, but none more than the flat-out, juvenile thrill of entering so many lives. I love my readers with an affection that is second only to what I feel for my family and friends, and I would be delighted to please them with every new book.

But I am, all the same, desperate not to be captured by that audience. I have self-consciously avoided cloning "Presumed Innocent" (to the oft-stated disappointment of many), knowing self-imitation would violate the rules I set for myself to start. Art—or whatever it is I'm doing—begins with the maker, not the audience. Capitulating to established expectations means abandoning that obligation to lead and is likely to yield the larded stuff that too often oozes out of the Hollywood sausage grinder.

Graham Greene, probably this century's most admired writer of suspense fiction, remarked that all writers tend to be governed by "a ruling passion." I regard myself as blessed to have been able to discover mine.

Over time I've realized that the ideal novel that deeply stirs everyone will never be written. Even "Anna Karenina" grows tiresome for some readers. The only true transcendence is achieved by the entire family of writers—of artists—who, together, manage to move us all. As individuals we can only dig toward our ruling passions, uncover them and desperately hope, as we fall, to be heard.

See Scorsese Speak on Scorsese at nytimes.com



Get a candid look at Martin Scorsese as he goes one-on-one in a conversation with Times critic Janet Maslin. Scorsese discusses New York since 9/11, reveals his favorite New York films and focuses on his upcoming movie "Gangs of New York." Recorded Live at our Arts & Leisure Weekend in January.

View as streaming video or download to your computer.

To order or for more information, visit

nytimes.com/criticschoice

expect the world®
The New York Times
nytimes.com