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Writing and Drawing

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Panel: Why I Write
When I was child I used to draw everywhere. My favourite place to draw was on the walls of my family home. My usually fond parents did not appreciate my interior decoration, they gave me drawing pads, but to begin with, I stubbornly preferred walls. They were not happy, for example, to find the white walls of a lavatory decorated with grotesque characters cavorting about, leaping on top of each other, leering at whoever came to sit on the enamel bowl with the wooden seat, an object graced every morning by the paternal bottom, the owner of which liked to spend half an hour at the beginning of each day on his throne with his Daily Telegraph, alone. He did not appreciate the intrusion of my scribblings, and told me so immediately, and in a gruff voice. They had the lavatory walls painted, scandalously blotting out many hours of my work.

I came to writing through drawing. I was a somewhat backward child, and after my period of infant graffitiing was finally over, I was given to spending much time in rooms, preferably small rooms, on my own, sitting cross-legged on the floor, with a pad in my lap and a pencil in my hand, drawing away, giggling happily, occasionally demonically, to myself at whatever I happened to be growing on the sheets of paper in front of me. Drawing was a kind of first language to me; I infinitely preferred it to words in the beginning. In time some of the characters I drew reappeared again and again, whether I wished them to or not, demanding lives beyond the pad. In time I’d write about them.

Then, and now, I was obsessed by fairy tales and folk tales, those books often beautifully illustrated which depict worlds frequently a little antiquated but not entirely dissimilar to our own, only tilted. Improbable things are allowed to happen in them, dark things too.

When I grew up, if this has been achieved, I continued to dwell on fairy tales and the dark universes that often exist in them. This is what I write. This is probably what I shall always write, and I hear my parents sighing — I can see my father’s pendulous jowls wobbling in dissatisfaction as he shakes his head — as I blatantly refuse to step beyond what some see as a permanent attachment to childish things: illustrated books; fairy tales, no matter how contemporary and urban. My father, I suppose, would like it to be noted that he is particularly upset because I’m not supposed to be here right now, I’m supposed to be on some ocean somewhere bobbing up and down looking through binoculars on behalf of her Britannic Majesty’s navy. No matter how many plastic battleships my father gave me as a child (and there were many fleets of them), still, despite five rather irksome years in naval academy, I did not follow him or my grandfather or my great-grandfather or my great-great grandfather or any other distant
grandfathers no matter how hoary into the nautical business. I would not do it. I wrote and drew dark, grim, listless fairy tales instead; it is a habit with me.

People often don’t understand that a writer can also draw as well as write, they see it as utterly superfluous, and also, frequently, wonder if the writing itself is somehow lacking for it to need illustrating. In such moments, I think of other writer artists who endlessly inspire me. In many difficult exchanges with exasperating editors, the thought of them has kept me at it; I think of the unhappy world of Mervyn Peake’s characters, or of the upturned Glasgow of Alisdair Grey, but most of all of a small town in Poland seen through the painfully sensitive words and drawings of the great Bruno Schultz.

Please understand that when I draw or write these horrible little tales of mine that they are not, no matter what may occur inside them, divorced from everyday life. My characters may include an old man who lives in a leather arm chair which is more significant than him; or a woman who believes herself a dog, who sniffs under dogs tails in the local park; or a man who wears white gloves, an habitual kleptomaniac who steals only objects that people particularly love, regardless of their value, and hoards them; or a very isolated pair of identical female twins who, cut off from the world, build miniature plasticine cities in which to imagine themselves popular inhabitants - but their characteristics are so displayed in the hope that through exaggeration they may somehow show something of the various potterings and pottiness, failings, exhaustions and delight of the taxing business of being a human.

So far my writing has never been set in any actual cities, these cities of mine, like those of many fairy tales, are imagined, though they posses many recognizable things — including McDonalds and GAPs which are so ubiquitous that they even invade imaginary cities. I have complete freedom this way as a writer, no one is going to come up to me and in hectoring tones insist, for example, that such and such an earthquake simply never took place. The book I have just finished is written in part as a guide book, it includes coffee, lunch and supper breaks and instructions on how to get to these establishments, which don’t actually exist. For this book I have made a sculpture, a piece of civic sculpture to be found in this imagined city. It is of two girls in long simple dresses, who were very famous people in their city and are the principal characters in the book. The sculpture is the only crumb of the city that is actually real, that palpably exists, at the moment it’s located in the city of Iowa City. It’s not sure how to get where it really belongs, likewise, of the last eight years I’ve spent at least eight months of every year away from my homeland, wandering about writing and drawing, frequently confused. The drawing inspires the writing, the writing inspires the drawing, the wandering inspires them both.