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Writing as Philosophy and Craft

Penelope Todd

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‘Like a fish which swims calmly in deep water, I felt all about me the secure supporting pressure of my own life. Ragged, inglorious, and apparently purposeless, but my own.’
– Iris Murdoch, Under the Net

About the philosophy of writing I have only my own story to tell. I work from the inside out, learning as I go. When you sit to write fiction on any given day, you don’t know what you’re coming to. You might know the scene and who will be there, but you can’t tell what they’ll think, or say to one another, who will be rolling a leaf in their fingers, who will lean out the window and see the cat in the street below, who will let fly the first punch. That is the thread your writing unrolls from the spool, inch by inch.

Serendipitously, I started out writing fiction about teenagers. My own children were the age, roughly, of my protagonists. While they were making that metamorphosis from children to adults, subconsciously I was forced to reconsider my own: what I’d done well, what badly, how I had come to my middle years so numb and dumb to my own life – what it needed, where it had been, where it meant to go.

There are stories already sealed within each of us. Some of us take a long time to uncover, decipher and assent to them. We start our search when we find that the ones we’ve attached ourselves to prove no longer accurate, their themes too limited.

Via fiction, via the explorations and quandaries of my characters, I began to write out the most basic premises of personhood. Who am I? What am I doing here? Which way am I facing? Which way is up – or should I go down instead? What has life given me, with which I might navigate?

As a nurse and a mother I’d become pragmatic, responsible, and good at attending to the surface details. At first I approached fiction writing as simply another (albeit very rewarding) practice. When I wrote it was as though one hand hid what the other produced, and I made little connection between the stories and my inner world.

It took a while to sink in, the role of the imagination (which I’d considered a curious and optional extra: a childhood relic and means of escape from the real) – not simply to create fiction, but to lay out the ground ahead; to realise new ways of being, both in a story’s characters, and in one’s own life. To go forward truthfully requires more courage than you think you have. It’s one thing to write a difficult scene—you tell yourself you can erase it before publication—but usually those are the very scenes you may not delete if you are to enlarge your boundaries. Hidden matters come to light and demand to be named. Then you must stand by them.
You’re building a house from the mud of the self. The stories are the bricks dug and shaped from your own past and present and future – what you didn’t know you knew. As you write, your real life takes shape around you.

You may not build with cardboard, cheap cuts, straw. The rubbish, anything unsound, has to go. As a believer, I thought I might write books about God, but the god I’d shaped, or allowed others to shape on his behalf in my head, wasn’t up to it. He had to go. I don’t know if there will be another. My half-cocked theories about life had to go; judgements; divisions in the mind. Your hands are prised open.

Only after you’ve been writing for a while do you realise how you’re being propelled and how flush your characters sit with the recesses of your own psyche. With each fiction you find the same people appearing in different guises but they become more nuanced; stereotypes diminish; paradox is rife.

Fiction-writing is the plunge into deep water where sooner or later you realise that the pale limbs following you around are your own, that the sunken ship, as Adrienne Rich has it in her poem ‘Diving into the Wreck’, is also yours:

‘I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.’

This ship holds all you pushed under all your life, now sea-changed treasure. All the currency you need. The jewellery you were too young to wear before; the ship’s logs; strange food sealed in old tins and still edible.

In fiction you enter new countries, you wrestle with situations and people you never thought you wanted to meet, but the stories insist, then in real life it starts to happen: you enter new countries. You’re made to wrestle with situations and people you never thought you wanted to meet but your soul—if you believe in a soul—has insisted.

Writing, you do what you can, the best way you can with the handful of tools you’re given: that past with its psychological grist, these present circumstances with their limitations, this aesthetic, this intelligence, these capacities for work or imagination, this temperament, that fascination – all of which, being bendy and slippery and hard to hold, conspire to make your work as flawed as you are, but also as rich and multiple. You are always assessing, sharpening, dismantling and putting back together your tools, trying to improve them. Comparing them to the tools of others is seldom helpful.

Fiction is the local anaesthetic and handbook that allows you to open again and again your wounds. Who knows if they’re not wounds with which you entered the world, but in your early life, between
you and your parents and a select few others, you made sure they were marked out, opened, filled with grit, closed up and sealed – all but the faintest scar left visible.

Fascinations, compulsions too, of mind, emotion, body, are the wounds itching, festering, prying themselves open and you have to investigate them; if you deny them they come back in another trickier form or format. You’re half-blind, clumsy, you blunder about; you inspect the damages and the glimmers of new growth; you do what you have to. Writing fiction is the pale thread that leads you in and leads you out again. And in again, and out. But as long as you write down at the bone then it is not only your own shape you describe but the shape of a human.

I don’t know if there’s any healing to be had, only wounds open now to the air – open wounds; open doors and windows; if you didn’t have it before, the entire feeling spectrum; permeable skin, allergic reactions, intense attractions to, or respectful presence with, the other. Perhaps the other is God.

When you’ve done enough of this digging and stacking, poking and crawling about in the dark, meeting and wrestling and parting, I think the process begins to change. You might be a little less prone to your own dramas, and the dramas of your characters, a modicum of detachment becomes possible. You’ve learned some restraint, been offered some grace. You’ve done what may be considered your apprenticeship.

On one hand, everything has changed. On the other, nothing has. Writing, you go quietly about your life as you’ve always done, perhaps even more quietly because now you know what you need and what you can do without.

A family motto from my father’s side was Portet Vive. It behoves us to live. I choose a magnificent over a mundane interpretation. It behoves us to live well: richly, broadly, deeply and intricately – which adverbs, for me, describe the route that writing seems to take.

[Portions in italics are from my memoir, Digging for Spain, to be published in March 2008.]