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Being Honest

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Panel: Why I Write The Way I Do

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Being Honest

Let’s start by being honest: When I first decided to choose the topic, “Why I Write The Way I Do,” it was because of one reason: I once already had written an essay about that and thought it would mean less work in Iowa and more time to focus on my next novel.

But things have changed. After making friends with writers and non-writers from all over the world (plus Iowa), after running each day along the Iowa River, after visiting so many cultural events in Iowa City and elsewhere, after being challenged to sing the forbidden German anthem, witnessing cowboys fighting off the bad Indians in Fort Madison, shocking Americans by telling them that I walked to Sycamore Mall, got soaked in down-pouring rain because I dared to walk to Sycamore Mall, laughed my head off among Amish people, met a biology teacher who doesn’t believe in evolutionary theory, called four fire trucks in the middle of the night, learned a lot about the relationship between men and women in Egypt and was called daddy by Gabriel, after all that, I felt and feel the desire to honor this most intriguing time I’ve spent here by writing something new for the last IWP panel.

So: Why do I write the way I do?
Honestly: I don’t know.

Isn’t this something writers usually get asked by critics and academics? I even think it’s dangerous to spend too much time thinking about it because I might not like the conclusion. I’m sure, most of you know what happens if you lie in bed and start thinking about falling asleep: You don’t fall asleep. The same happens to me when I start analyzing my writing: I can’t write anymore.

Therefore, I dare to cross out the last four words of the topic and will pretend the question is: Why do I write?
The short answer to this is simple: Because I want to be loved. That sounds good, doesn’t it. That sounds pretty honest.

But, as far as I can tell, writers aren’t loved that much. There will always be more people around that hate their writing (and them) than supporters. If writers do what they do only because they want to be loved, then someone should tell them that there are hundreds of thousands of better possibilities to achieve this.

There has to be more about writing.

When I was a young boy I once saw my mother making notes while she was talking on the phone. I had witnessed this before. But this time was different. I envied her, I wanted to be able to do that, too: Taking a pen, moving it over paper and drawing something that looked like a picture without actually being one. In the following weeks I filled endless pages scribbling, I painted signs that no one could read. Not even me. But it felt like writing. It felt important.

In elementary school, when I was able to read and write a bit, I found happiness in lists. I wasn’t much into books. I lacked focus for literature, I rarely ever made it to the end of a story. I preferred comics. My parents supported that kind of hobby, hoping I would sooner or later lose interest in it and grab a book by my own free will. Plus, at least I was reading text bubbles.

These comics were the first things I listed, and were the only thing I wrote besides what I had to write in school. I remember this deeply satisfying feeling. The fact that I was writing was important, what I was writing was not. Soon I listed other things as well. Everything was put to paper: “Collection albums”, “Commodore Games”, “stuff” (including “29 mini divers”, “1 water necklace”, “6
mini transportation machines”, “3 Batman cards”). Even the ingredients of canned soups. Everything needed to be listed. Sometimes in capital letters, sometimes in red, sometimes with highlighters, sometimes on sticky notes, sometimes underlined, sometimes copied. Last but not least I drew a map of my room and marked with arrows where everything was, which posters were hanging on the walls, and also: Where I kept the lists that listed all that.

Once I had listed everything I could think of, I looked for a new task. I started taking notes about my classmates. I divided them into two obvious groups: boys and girls. On the far left I wrote down her or his name, next to their grade for “Friendliness”, and after that, the grade for “Evilness” and finally the overall grade, which could go from “Super good” (A) to “Alright” (C) all the way to “Yuck, terrible” (F). Some of the grades I crossed out. This was because sometimes classmates, especially female ones, who weren’t content with their grades, would beg me to give them a better one. Usually I gave in (as long as they begged long enough). Additionally I listed the phone numbers of my classmates and demanded them to sign my list. Only very few were okay with that. To convince them I wrote on the bottom of the page: Everyone who signs correctly will get something sometime and everyone who doesn’t won’t get anything.

And still I was thrilled by writing. It was everything to me. I created my own magazine. The first issue was titled: “the nutty one”. Above that it said: Everything inside is superb! But once again I was only attracted by the act of writing. I stole most of the content. A satirical text from MAD-Magazine and riddles of the Mickey Mouse Magazine, walkthroughs for Zelda from the Nintendo Club Magazine. I copied the self-made pages in my father’s office and sold them at school for an impressive five Deutsch-Marks. Every magazine in the supermarket would have cost half the price. My classmates didn’t mind. Motivated by their interest I produced additional issues. And added a new title: NONTE (Which doesn’t mean anything in German either. I remember only trying to employ a word I had never heard before. I wanted to be original!)

That’s how I continued. I wrote to write.

I believe there’s an archivist in every writer. When I write, I list ideas and memories and things I observed in my head, choose only a few of them and put them together on paper. Of course, I also want to tell a story and not only fill blank pages. But, honestly, what really keeps me going is the deep desire to put one word after the other. Maybe I think much longer about what word that might be, but in the end I’m still writing lists. And I do it out of a simply urge: Because I need to.