

↘ ↘  
In the night, in mid-dream, people who are entire strangers to one another  
sometimes will congregate atop my pillow. They file into my sleeping skull  
/in perplexing medleys. A face from grade school may be twinned with one met  
/a week ago on a rain-forest trail in the Olympic Mountains. A pair of friends  
I joked with yesterday/now drift in arguing with an editor I worked for/more than  
a thousand miles from here. How thin the brainwalls must be, so easily can  
acquaintanceships be struck up among these/random residents of the dark.

➔  
Memory, the near-neighborhood of dream, is almost as casual in its hospitality.

When I fix my sandwich lunch, in a quiet noon, I may find myself sitting down  
thirty years ago in the company of the erect old cowboy from Texas, Walter Badgett

Forever the same is the meal with Walter: fried mush with dark corn syrup, and <sup>bread</sup> ~~bre~~

which Walter first has toasted and then dried in the oven. When we bite,

it shatters and crashes in our mouths, and the more we eat, the fuller our plates

grow with the shrapnel of crumbs. After the last roaring bite, Walter sits back

tall as two of the ten-year-old me and asks down: "Well, reckon we can make it

➔  
through till night now?"

I step to the stove for tea, and come instead onto the battered blue-enamel  
coffee pot in a shepherd's wagon, my father's voice saying, "Ye could float  
your grandma's flat-iron on the Swede's coffee." I walk back toward my typewriter,  
past a window framing the backyard fir trees. They are replaced by the wind-leaning  
jackpines of one Montana ridgeline or another. I glance higher for some hint of  
the weather, and the square of air broadens and broadens to become the blue expanse  
over Montana rangeland, so vast and vaulting that it rears, from the foundation-line  
of the plains horizon, to form the walls and roof of all of life's experience that  
my younger self could imagine, a single/great house/of sky.

3 min.

Those words--the title section of my first book, This House of Sky--I suppose began my career, of being freighted in for occasions like this, to spout words about words. I take it that the only conceivable reason for asking a writer to talk out loud is to try find out what he's up to. In-so-far as I know what I'm up to, I'll concentrate--for the rest of my <sup>time</sup>~~twenty-minute~~-slot here--on some of the ingredients of my work: how a writer, or at least this writer, makes books.

The makings of a book--and so far I've made five more, since This House of Sky, and have another one that'll be published next year, and one beyond that which is wanting to happen--the makings of a book, I'm sorry to say, have more salt of perspiration than inspiration.

The writer, or at least this writer, has to make the words and sentences add up day by day--the arithmetic of creation. <sup>Along with</sup> ~~Within~~ the daily woodpile of words, though, the carvings of craft have to add up, too. In the course of my first novel, The Sea Runners, I got in touch with a park ranger up at Sitka, who was an expert on the carpentry and shipbuilding that went on there when Alaska still was Russian America. He gave me not only the working details I needed, for some scenes in The Sea Runners, but he also wrote out for me a quote from the English poet William Blake:

"Art...cannot exist but in minutely organized particulars."

When I'd finished blinking over the literary and philosophical bent of park rangers  
~~IN THOSE~~  
~~these~~ days--probably something he had needed to get through the era of James Watt--it  
occurred to me that the quote explains much of the craft that I believe has to go  
into the writing of a book.

An example: at one turn of the plot in Ride with Me, Mariah Montana, the three  
main characters visit the family ranch that the reporter, Riley Wright, turned his  
back on for a newspaper life instead. Riley's <sup>rancher</sup> brother Morgan Wright shows up briefly  
to confront Riley-- and here is Morgan's appearance:

"Morgan stood spraddled, thumbs alone showing from the weather-worn hands parked in his front pockets, as though it might take all the time in the universe to hear this matter out."

The vital word, what is sometimes called the crystalizing detail, in that sentence is the verb "parked"--those hands "parked" in the front pockets of ~~his~~ Morgan's bluejeans. habitually, naturally, not stuck in his pockets, jammed in his pockets, but just by God parked. And I only worked about half a day to come up with that one precise word--that minute particular.

~~Amid this onstage aggregation~~ the woman singer didn't look like much—chunky, in an old gray gabardine cattledealer suit, her blond hair cut in an approximate fringe—but her voice made maximum appearance, so to speak. She sang, my God, she sang with a power and a timbre that pulled at us just short of touch, as when static electricity makes the hair on an arm stand straight when a hand moves just above it. Holding the microphone like she was sipping from it, she sent that voice surging and trembling, letting it ride and fall with the cascades of the instruments but always atop, always reaching the words out and out to the crowd of us.

It will come as no surprise to this audience that among the makings of books such as mine are libraries. I can tell you, almost to the day, when libraries took hold of my life.

So now, quick as this, you are eighteen years old. You have come by train—which tells how long ago this is—from a Montana town with a population of 75, to begin college at Northwestern University, in suburban Chicago. And you set off to walk this campus you have never laid eyes on before, and there on a slight rise atop a wide green sweep of spotless lawn stands the university library, Deering Library. Deering is a library like they don't build 'em any more—similar to the original portion of Suzzallo Library on the University of Washington campus, the high

roof, but with a pair of gothic towers poking up at each end. Deering had architectural fame of a sort. The story was that Frank Lloyd Wright had driven past the Northwestern campus on Lake Shore Drive one day, looked at Deering Library with those gothic towers nobly poking into the air, and said, "It looks like a pig on its back."

I think what he really didn't like about it, though, was that Deering Library so much resembled a cathedral. And there's where Mr. Wright was wrong. There was nothing inappropriate about that resemblance, that library was a kind of cathedral, in several ways it behaved like a cathedral. You step now into the reading room of Deer-

ing, you find that the banks of lights hang just above the tables, they hang all the way from the vaulted ceiling, they hang down what seems to be thousands of feet just for your reading convenience, they hang there like the watchfobs of the gods. You sit with your book there in the golden pool of reflection, the lens of light brings the printed words up into your eyes. The diarist Bruce Frederick Cummings has written of "the desire every book has to be taken down and read, to live, to come into being in somebody's mind."

The library we are in today, I know I have used since my very first books--for some of the background of This House of Sky, and for a lot of the foreground--the life and times of the pioneer diarist James G. Swan--of Winter Brothers. I once suggested to a statewide meeting of librarians that they perform a really remarkable job for society-- that they're the bartenders of information. The Seattle Public has set up a lot of rounds for me.

So, those are at least a handful of the making of books such as mine, and doubtless of many other writers as well. The minute particulars that are the molecules of literary creation. The lineage of craftsmanship that a writer tries to live up to, as he chores away at the lifting of words onto paper. The resource that nourishes all others--libraries.

All in all, the writer has a job description which it has taken  
the Internal Revenue

Service, in its omniscience, to do justice to. In the IRS four-digit codes for  
self-employed business or professional people, the writer looks in vain down the  
pageful of numerals for beauticians and undertakers--and even used car salesmen--  
to find that his occupation is left to that last lonely line down in the corner--  
"unable to classify."

Maybe, though, we must hope that writing is always beyond the grasp of governments.

Our best guarantee of that, I suppose, is to keep our work on the frontiers of imagination. That, indeed, might even be in the novelist's job description. Fiction is a deliberate dream. Probably any writing--done with passion--is. At least so it seems, in the daily surprise, when you are a writer, and you sit down to a keyboard, to see what the fingers have to say to you. . . and they begin, "In the night, in mid-dream. . ."

Any of us who have ever looked in our family photo albums know that, genetically speaking, we are not so much ourselves but piecework of those before us. Writers too have lineage, heritage. The writing that makes books out of lore and lingo is a craft that has to be learned and worked at, and one of the ancestors I chose, upon becoming a working writer, was waiting for me there in the pages of his sea stories, Joseph Conrad.

Joseph Conrad of course is famous for the sweep of his rhetoric, the oceanic power of his sentences. Every literary critic knows that--but it seems to me what they either don't know, or haven't said, is something else that Conrad was just as terrific at--quick characterization.

In Conrad's great storm-at-sea story, Typhoon, which features the most literal-minded, phlegmatic hero in literary history, Captain MacWhirr-- who outlasts the typhoon by not having enough imagination to get scared-- there's the one-sentence summary of the captain's wife:

"The only secret of her life was her abject terror of the time when her husband would come home to stay for good."

Given that kind of example, I try--with all the craft in me--to make the minor characters in my books vivid. To make them behave as memorably in my pages as Laurence Olivier has said each actor in a play must contribute to the play as a whole--"the third spear carrier on the left should believe that the play is all about the third spear carrier on the left."

Here's one of my spear-carriers, who doesn't even have a name in Ride with Me, <sup>M</sup>ariah Montana--she's simply the lead singer in a country-&-western band called The Roadkill Angels, but here she comes: