

In my own case, which I presume I ought to talk about, since it's the one I ~~know~~ ^{anything about} and evidently was ~~invited~~ here because of, I still know--or at least can say--dismayingly little about how my writing happens. It seems to me largely a matter of stubbornness. So when someone says to me, "Well, I want to write, how do I go about it?"--I do have an answer, but I'm not sure it's helpful. It's that if you go about it as I have, you go to a school of journalism

when you are 18, stay ~~there~~ for 5 years and 2 degrees, take a job on a newspaper for a couple of years, take a job on a magazine for a couple more years, go back to a university for three more years and a doctorate, ^{in history,} then spend ten years as a free lance, writing everything but matchbook covers, --you have to draw the line somewhere. By the time it all adds up to about 20 years and a million published words, you are discovered, at age 39, as a new young writer.

I've thought about this ^{considerably} a ~~lot~~, and it doesn't seem to be anything I can ~~sell~~ ^{market} as a kit.

Well, those are a few thoughts, such as they are, that I have about writing. Now, about writering.

My notion is that there's considerably more to writering than just doing the writing. Writering seems to me the business of exercising whatever abilities of professionalism you can attain. As far as the writing part of this is concerned, of course it means finding your way toward the top of your writing ability and proving yourself capable of sustained performance there. But it seems to me there **are** also elements outside of the daily typewriter work--attitudes, aims, capabilities--which also are necessary to being a writer.

well-timed
~~Well, those are ^{a few} thoughts, such as they are, that I have about writing. Now,~~
 about writing.

~~My notion is that writing is the business of exercising whatever abilities
 you can attain...to the point where, by the terms of a general readership and your
 day-by-day
 own professional principles, there's nothing else to call you but a writer.~~
 of writing and professionalism

Perhaps it's something like the difference between, say, a baseball player who,
 before the start of every game in the Kingdome, stands with his cap over his sternum
 and "sings" the words of the national anthem...and, say, a jazz singer who is invited
 in to sing the anthem over the public address system. Now, the baseball player perhaps
 will have sung that national anthem 162 times a year, for any number of baseball
 seasons. And he may be an absolutely consummate baseball player--although if he's
 a consummate player appearing in the Kingdome, he's probably in a visiting uniform.

But even if you could stand beside that consummate player ~~him~~ during the anthem for all 162 games, I ~~think~~ ^{believe} you'd ^{still} come away thinking, "Hey, here's a guy mostly mouthing the words and worrying about keeping his bubblegum fresh." The jazz singer, on the other hand, may not have sung the national anthem since kindergarten, but good or bad, she's going to be able to step out there and somehow sing that thing. Once the game starts, the baseball player may go on to perform superbly for two hours; he'll get the headlines, the statistics in the record books, and, need I say, the salary. But still, there isn't going to be any question about who...really...sang.

It may come down to the quotation from the eloquent lips of Louis Armstrong. My lawyer, a truly renaissance gentleman, has it on the wall of his office, and undoubtedly is the only attorney ^{ever} to have cited it in a law review article. By courtesy of him, from the lips of Louis Armstrong, the quote is: "We all go do-re-mi, but you got to find the other notes for yourself."

To move away from the musical analogy, I suppose what I'm talking about in my catch-word of "writering" is just this--acceptance of the commitment that writing is the main thing you do, and that you carry on, as best you can, the output of writing and its supportive tasks as well. On to a few of those supportive tasks in a moment, but first I should ~~warn~~ warn that as it comes about *- as being in the business of "writering" -* that you get to be recognized as a writer, the perceptions you have of yourself and the perceptions others have of you, are both going to change. I can testify, out of my experience in the past half year or so, that the perceptions of others can change alarmingly.

I have to say ^{here} that once you have a book which has been liked by the reviewers at both TIME and THE NEW YORKER--

...which must be some sort of record for unlikelihood; it's like Muhammad Ali and Beverly Sills singing a duet ~~of~~ of that anthem at the Kingdome...

--once that happens, the writing business gets a whole lot easier. ~~It wasn't so~~

But For more years than I want to count, I found that whenever I met someone for the first time, they asked my profession and I replied that I was a free lance writer, they said something like, "Well, I read Cosmopolitan and People, how come I don't recognize your name?" Now, the only apt response to this is to point out that the ~~1970 census~~ ^{25,000} listed about ~~25,000~~ ^{also} other Americans ~~who~~ describe their occupation as "writer", and invite your newfound friend to recite all their names, to prove ~~to you~~ that you're the only one who ~~goes~~ ^{stumbles} around being unheard of. But ~~xx~~ that doesn't get an acquaintanceship off to a really smooth start, is the problem with that.

Or, there's the allied possibility that the other person will readily accept that you think you're a writer, ~~but~~ then will say something sympathetic and drop the topic. For example, it wasn't

very long ago in this town that if you told somebody you were a free lance writer, they'd look sorrowful and ask when you got laid off at Boeing.

That always perturbed me, the sharply rising curve of "Writers" who'd been rollercoastered out of a job at Boeing or elsewhere. I mean, even in the toughest times of working ^{at the typewriter} ~~as a writer~~, I've never gone around proposing myself as a free lance aeronautical engineer.

But ^{then} When people do begin automatically to dub you a writer, ^{writing-} to accept that you're in the business of there's the danger that they're going to consider you more than a writer, ~~too~~. That is, there's a real tendency to believe that a writer is an expert about matters other than knowing where to find the keys on a typewriter. Among the mail I've had since House of Sky was published was this inquiry:

My dear Ivan Doig...

I wonder if you would be so kind as to write me your answer to the question:

"Will civilization, as we know it, survive the century."

And when you're not in danger of being thought profound, there's the worse prospect that you're thought of as a celebrity. Even some of your sanest friends automatically seem to expect that now you are, or are going to become, a television performer. And some of them will say, too, that they can't wait to see the movie that'll ^{automatically} be made of your book, and who do you want to play you in the movie? That flabbergasted

me the first few times I heard it. But I now see their ~~point~~ point, it's an important part of ~~life~~ ^{you'd like to have} life to be able to say who ~~is going to~~ play you in the screen role-- if you don't have that vision you don't have much--so I've carefully thought it through and can now say I will let only one man be me in any film version-- Spencer Tracy.

It seems to me those are some of the goofy side-effects of writing^{just} you have to try live with. What's more important are the parts of it you have to try live up to. My own feeling is that you try do these things for your own sake, or at least the sake of your own work, rather than believing that you're carrying the torch for the future of all literature. Lord knows, writing is enough like trying to light damp matches in a high wind, without thinking about yourself as a torchbearer.

Anyway, I believe that one obligation a writer ought to keep in mind is the steady commitment that in return for his own professional standards of work, he ^{work at every chance} will ~~try~~ to obtain professional standards of pay. Now for a free lance magazine writer, this seems to be well-nigh impossible, or at least horrifically rare. But I think it should be fought for at every chance. The only organizations I choose to belong to are a pair--the Authors Guild, and the American Society of Journalists

specifically
 and Authors--which exist to do battle for the writer. Personally, in more than a dozen years of free lance articles locally, I've nagged editors time and again about their rates of pay. I take a perverse pride that almost every time I've done ~~such~~ so, ~~arguing~~ the publication has spent more money, in terms of company time, arguing with me than the size of the increase I was asking for. Where books are concerned, I've never bought the idea that a book contract can be understood only by someone standing on Manhattan Island. ~~I mean, they do teach us to read out here in the provinces, and even a little arithmetic.~~ When it became evident that I would need an agent to place House of Sky with a national publisher, I asked a very trusted ^{honest and efficient} friend if she would be my agent. She said she would, and in not so many months we had the contract for

House of Sky.

~~my agent.~~ When she got too busy raising children to handle the negotiations for my next book, I did it myself, with the careful help of the Louis Armstrong-quoting lawyer -- and that contract too, like House of Sky's, was prompt and perfectly acceptable.

This is not a general prescription that every writer try to act as his or her own agent, or to create their own. The very least I can say about my friend the agent is that she is one of a kind--that she more than lived up to my expectations in her handling of House of Sky, and that, despite the needs of the writers of the world, there is no immediate way she can be cloned, or lured from motherhood. And I hasten to say that the publishers of the world would like nothing better than a general do-it-yourself trend of writers trying to do all their own agenting, I'm sure. I can imagine

that on some future book, I might want the careful ministrations of an expert Manhattan Island professional agent. But it is to say, here, that I feel a writer shouldn't abandon financial decisions, or feel not ~~was~~ competent to make them. Writers have little enough clout in the marketplace--if we don't show up there at all, we have even less.

Things an agent is going to be out when

financial decisions, or feel not competent to make them or participate fully in them. There ~~is~~ seems to be a feeling among people who write, or want to write, that ^{only} a high-powered professional ^{New York} agent ^{can} ~~is going to~~ be the angel of financial salvation. Along with this goes the dreamy notion that writers are so temperamental and child-like they wouldn't know ~~how~~ how to handle a dollar if you did give it to them. I think that is not only nonsense, but dangerous nonsense. Writers have little enough clout in the marketplace--if we don't show up there at all, we have even ~~less~~ less. As far as the terms of any book contract are concerned, I think ^{just} it should be remembered that they do teach us to read out here in the provinces--and even a little arithmetic.

financial note,

Along with that, in my musings as to what constitutes "writering", I think there's the proposition that being a writer should take all the possible time you can give it. it possibly can be managed. Full-time, if ~~at all possible.~~ You don't, after all, find people going around being ^{prima ballerinas} part-time brain surgeons, or test pilots when they can find the time, or ~~ballet stars~~ in the evenings after they get off work driving a Metro bus. But I seem to find a notion loose in the world that if a person could just manage to set aside a little time once in a while, the ^{old} words would really start to flow. All I can tell you is, they don't for me. They drag their way out of enormous deserts of time. I've tried to do considerable reading about how other writers have worked--it's been a topic I ~~am~~ really am ~~X~~ much interested in--and the same seems to be true for many, many writers!

full-time it has to be.

Jeanette Winterson, Art Objects: ^Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery, quoted
in Wn Post Bk World, March 24, '96:

"The writer should refuse all definitions; of herself, and of her work, and
remember that whether her work sells or whether it doesn't, whether it is loved
or it is not, it is the same piece of work. Reaction cannot alter what is written.
And what is written is the writer's true home."

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.

For instance, in Conrad's great storm-at-sea story, Typhoon, the central figure is the most literal-minded phlegmatic character in literary history, Captain MacWhirr, who simply outlasts the typhoon by having about as much imagination as a box of rocks. But--there's also the one-sentence--ONE-sentence--summary of the captain's wife:

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

So. The heritage of craftsmanship I see in Conrad is to make the minor characters of a book vivid, ^{too.} To make them behave as importantly in my pages as Laurence Olivier said each actor in a play must contribute to the play as a whole--"the third spear carrier ~~from~~ on the left should believe that the play is all about the third spear ^{carrier} on the left."

then is

Here ~~is~~ one of my spear carriers, who doesn't even have a name in Ride with Me, Mariah Montana--she's simply the lead singer in a country-and-western band called /The Roadkill Angels,/ but here she comes:

"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 tremoring, 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."

pause

So, those are at least a handful of the makings of books such as mine, and doubtless of many other writers as well. The what-ifs which, after enough staring, come down out of the forest of the mind with the liquid hops of a squirrel. 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.

All in all, it's 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."

sit outside the poem. They and the town serve as a base of operations for the poem."

A base of operations, as Dick Hugo called it; a sense of place as this symposium titles it--trying to place it, as I've ^{termed} ~~called~~ it. Say it how you will, I think for a writer, place is something ~~max~~ to work from, and work on, and work toward. The material for creative carpentry. This, I think, may be the western angle of vision I'm trying for. Like Thomas Elanagan's poet, in The Year of the French, moonstruck in the Irish night, trying to see exactly on what that pale sheen is ^{falling} ~~flooding~~--scythe or sword or stone or spade--like him, I am trying to place it, with a craftsman's eye.

see Nancy Bunge interview of me (in "Correspondence/Ivan's miscellany" file drawer)
for material on the writing life.

p. 11+--the hurdles: good 1st bk, good sophomore bk, good 1st novel, good 2nd novel

WINTER

There was ~~at~~ time when I would write anything, seeing the magazine calling as the strictest interp'n of the original word, "storehouse"...

Me and Romulo (Notebook entry: did I write Romulo speech that appeared in Rotarian?)

--I was shocked, shocked that the Reader's Digest was planting pieces w/ us.

from Writg Examples
file

If you're going to be a writer, you have to do it on your own terms--command your own time, your own source of income--instead of trying to do it on Montana's (weather, distance, socializing, work)

p. 242--I'm a full-time believer in writing habits, pedestrian as it all may sound. You may be able to do without them if you have genius but most of us only have talent and this is simply something that has to be assisted all the time by physical and mental habits or it dries up and blows away. I see it happen all the time. Of course you have to make your habits in this conform to what you can do. I write only about two hours every day because that's all the energy I have, but I don't let anything interfere with those two hours, at the same time and the same place. This doesn't mean I produce much out of the two hours. Sometimes I work for months and have to throw everything away, but I don't think any of that was time wasted. Something goes on that makes it easier when it does come well. And the fact is that if you don't sit there every day, ^{day} ~~they~~ it would come well, you won't be sitting there.

The Habit of Being--Flannery O'Connor

→ p. 356--I have just corrected the page proofs and I spent a lot of time getting seems and as-if constructions out of it. It was like getting ticks off a dog.

p. 358--At least this (The Violent Bear It Away) is an individual book. I can't think of anybody else's that it might remind you of. Nobody would have been found dead writing it but me...

p. 481--I have no use for panels or any collection of writers. One writer is enough for people to digest at one time...

30 Dec. '84

epiphany: a spiritual event in which the essence of a given object of manifestation appears to the subject, as in a sudden flash of recognition.

William Boyd, in NYTBR Nov. 11 '84 piece in this Writing abt Writing file; "...what has occurred is a diminution in the 'story' element of the (short story) form: the short story as miniature novel, as tale, as completed, resolved narrative, has become increasingly rare. What has emerged is something more akin to Joyce's notion of an epiphany: a kind of moment in life that is pregnant and implicit with meaning and that the writer has, so to speak, distilled from the vast flow of phenomena that makes up the diurnal round."

Too true. Have recently read Susan Cheever's biography of her father, and as she tells it, what has always bothered me about John Cheever's work--a lack of guts, of worthwhile consequence--was somewhat rectified in his personal journal. And Updike, our great curator of words and maybe our best book reviewer, often leaves me hungry ~~back~~ after ~~him~~ I've read his suburban fiction. A frail epiphany in current New Yorker, Updike on the tragedy of lost luggage: "Had not my...daughter undertipped the airline porter...our luggage ~~xxxx~~ might have shown up on the carousel in Allentown that April afternoon in 1980, and I would not have spent an evening walking the sidewalks of Shillington, Pennsylvania, searching for the meaning of my existence, as once I had scanned those same sidewalks for lost pennies." Pretty damn close to self-parody, those lost pennies the manifest worth of the impulse behind this piece of writing.

the "those poor slobs" genre:

Dodie went to the K-Mart with a headache. A display of Kitty Litter fell over and narrowly missed her, and the woman's child in front of her in the checkout line spat up Tree Top apple juice on her. When she went home she still had the headache.

the laws of historical gravity

—for example, the sheepmen of Dancing undergoing hard times after 1893; people of Eng Crk having been thru the Depression.

The Triggering Town:

p. 32--line from Yeats: "Stumbling upon the blood dark track once more"...

The single-syllable word with a hard consonant ending is a unit of power in English, and that's the reason "blood dark track" goes off like rifle shots.

14 Jan. '85: recently read 1st novels by Michael Arlen and Nicholas Von Hoffman,
both greatly skilled journalists; and both books are heartless.

kinetic prose: RG Vliet in Scorpio Rising, p. 45:

"Over near the curb, perched on a candy wrapper, a monarch butterfly rocked back and forth, its orange-and-black wings, veined like a church window, slowly ~~opening~~ opening and closing, opening and closing like breathing. In the fall those things migrate clear to Mexico."

--"opening and closing" is like the breathing, also is like the butterfly's wings, larger words on either side of the small "and" body. Sentence would be even better by nicking out "slowly". Next sentence, "In the fall...", takes off from the precision of the previous describing one, is as general and slightly loose as the butterfly's flight, as migration, is.

Getting away w/ it

Caddy in The Sound and the Fury--had she appeared in Faulkner's work before? Or did he use the name because of its coincidence with the golf caddies?

- Orwell's plain verbs (Wayne McCreire)

Philip Howard--Times of London

...The tourists came and went, talking ^{about Parliament...}
~~of the houses of~~

...The women come and go, talking of Michelangelo...

PALONG! PALONG!! Braaf was four running strides away from the frozen Melander
and Wennberg before he, and they, realized--PALONG! PALONG!-- how cathedral
bells resound to those who sneak about the streets at night.

~~whose wds these~~ are I think I know.

*Frost-
Stopping
my. W. d.*

Wm Faulkner, "Spotted Horses":

"Calico-coated, small-bodies, with delicate legs and pink faces in which their mismatched eyes rolled wild and subdued, they huddled, gaudy motionless and alert, wild as deer, deadly as rattlesnakes, quiet as doves."

Call me Ishmael. Wonderful in itself, but even better if you know the Bible verse...

Faulkner, The Bear: "There was a man and a dog too this time." What makes it work is "this time"--saying implicitly, what about the other times?

Book of Genesis, 16:12--"his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of his brethren.

Here in the first eighty yards or so he had cover of a sort, a rib of rock and drift logs behind which he managed to scuttle, chest almost down to his knees, without showing himself, much.

"We wanted a piece that would have the closeness of reality and the distance of myth, because if there is no distance you aren't amazed, and if there is no closeness you aren't touched."

--Peter Brook

(NYT, March 5, 1995, on staging
"The Man Who")

NYT, Jan. 2 '94, Irish movie director Jim Sheridan ("In the Name of the Father"):
"Art is what you do after you're dead. All I'm trying for now is to communicate."

Bertrand Russell, in *Mysticism and Logic* (?):

"This is the reason why the past has such magical power. The beauty of its motionless and silent pictures is like the enchanted purity of late autumn, when the leaves, though one breath would make them fall, still glow against the sky in golden glory. The Past does not change or strive; like Duncan, after life's fitful fever it sleeps well: what was eager and grasping, what was petty and transitory, has faded away, the things that were beautiful and eternal shine out of it like stars in the night...."

...Another part of her research is to figure out each character's time frame. "Maybe I read too much Proust and Mann at an early age, but I think everybody operates on a very different time cycle. There's a garden time, church time, political time, geological time, semester time. In my writing, I like to have a number of time cycles running concurrently to give the various levels to a book that we all have in our lives. It also gets back to my feelings about determinism because you are always bound by the time frame you go by."

--Shelby Hearon, PW interview Ap 3 '87 in "Writing apt
Writing" file

Writers are a lot like farmers and ranchers--the rest of society figures you don't really need any money, you're just happy to do it for the exercise.

Placing it on the pages.

A story is like the wind--it comes from far away and we feel it.

--Margaret Kingsland, at Billings Cultural Congress, Sept. '87,
quoting an African bushman

All of that--one of Richard Hugo's most famous and striking and imaginative poems--because he was semi-dragged to an old mining town he didn't want to go to.

Here again from Hugo's book *The Triggering Town*, he explains how creation like this happens:

(Hugo, The Triggering Town, p. 5:)

"I suspect that the true or valid triggering subject is one in which physical characteristics or details correspond to attitudes the poet has toward the world and himself. For me, a small town that has seen better days often works. Contrary to what reviewers and critics say about my work, I know almost nothing of substance about the places that trigger my poems. ~~Knowing can be a limiting thing. If the population of a town is nineteen but the poem needs the sound seventeen, seventeen is easier to say if you don't know the population....~~ Often, a place that starts a poem for me is one I have only glimpsed while passing through. It should make impression enough that I can see things in the town--the water tower, the bank, the last movie announced on the marquee before the theater shut down for good, the closed hotel--long after I've left... They act as a set of stable knowns that

sit outside the poem. They and the town serve as a base of operations for the poem."

So, these are a few of the notions that come to mind in me, when "a sense of place" is mentioned--a base of operations, as Dick Hugo called it. Not just geography, unmatched as so much of the Montana landscape is. But "place" as something to work from, and work on, and work toward. In one of the best recent Northwest regional ~~books~~ pieces of work, a book called Sky People by a north-of Spokane writer named Jack Nisbet, there is a story about one of his neighbors, a wiry rancher in years-old blue jeans, sitting around the kitchen with his hat on, drinking coffee, and the rancher says something like, "I haven't been all that many places. But I've seen things where I've been." ~~That rancher wasn't just a Western talker. In his own way, he was speaking that rancher was a Montanan?~~ ~~Do I even need to tell you,~~ →

Stanley Davison, Nov. 12 '84 letter abt Eng Crk:

"Besides the big, overall excellence there are little extras, like the map. I flipped back to it three or four times, had it memorized rest of the way. How many novels I've read which would have gained from a little help with the geography. A particular appeal to me is the way you maintained 'unity of place', as our Lit. teachers used to call it. Vital in a short story, it strengthens a novel too. I like to settle in and watch developments in an area of a few hours on foot or horseback."

writing is a literary pentathlon I keep trying to stretch into a decathlon.

i.e., careless

ed

You can be skillful and yet sloppy; but not a craftsman and sloppy.

20 Dec. '84

Dick Brown's letter (27 Nov. '84) to me evaluating English Creek is in the Scotch Heaven ideas file.

The Flight of the Phoenix: with its remarkable final line, appxly "Out of the desert came seven men and a monkey," is a possible example of concave technique: a book written for that final line. To some extent I did something similar in inserting earlier stuff to lead to Rascal Fair's final "Tell me, tell ~~brady~~ me that, whoever can."

Playing above the 3d fret

--Emmylou Harris mentioned this on Prairie Home Companion, 17 March '85, as she began to accompany herself on guitar; make some analogy between the fret on a guitar and a writer's fretting?

Vincent Canby, NYT, June 7 '85, on John Travolta movie "Perfect":

(the plot) "is less complicated than 'War and Peace' but somewhat more difficult to follow..."

from Peg Walz, in '78 letters file:

"Do you remember the clerk in The Plague who kept rewriting the first sentence of his novel because he wanted the publisher, when he read it, to say, #Hats off!'"

"Well, hats off. Not just for the first sentence. Hats off for every sentence of the book. It is beautifully written."

Vic Scheffer, Sept. '84, told me he first-drafts with felt pen on duplicator paper--
it's so slick the pen flies across it.

Manual Labors

--the cooling, adding-to, and revising of a ms chunk, while it's in the thin blue binder with the Rotary cog and Manual del Presidente del Club on cover.

--my only real office stint (in roomful of desks) and it about drove me crazy.

--answering letters to Rotary Club presidents, etc.

--imitation blue calfskin, like offspring of Bunyan's blue ox Babe.

Writing so modulated it is one single-note hum.

Magical realism gets away with an astounding amount. In "The Old Gringo" Fuentes has a boy chase a coin across a church floor, no evident connection with plot, a coin shot out of air, ditto. Vargas Llosa says of his new novel, about a Peruvian revolutionary, that he's writing a deliberate circularity, many points of views and versions of the men; but what's the proper size of the circle?

Fiction is a deliberate dream... a journey into what-if. What if...two people had been in love... had a war of the heart and snapped apart... but still had to work... in the same office? What if it was a really small office, the size of a... motorhome? Three years of what-iffing, and here is this book--what if I called it Ride with Me, Mariah Montana--featuring a newspaper photographer named Mariah, her emphatically ex-husband Riley Wright the reporter assigned with her to do a series of stories for Montana's centennial, last year--being driven around the state by Mariah's struggling newly-widowed father, Jicky McCaskill, in his Winnebago.

Jick and the "newspaper aces," as he a little sarcastically calls Mariah and Riley, keep having encounters not just with each other, but with the past. In Jick, these are sometimes severe--"memory storms," he calls them. But as is the case with the past, he never quite knows what is going to present itself, when--and so, in this scene, one of the main characters from the earlier books, English Creek and Dancing at the Rascal Fair, makes her way into this book. Jick, Mariah, and Riley have just crossed Mariah's namesake river in northern Montana--the Marias--and pulled in to the town of Shelby, as usual looking for something for their newspaper series.

Conrad wrote not in his 2nd lang, but his 3rd; if you think Mont has a
trifled history, try Poland.

- Con's prof'l writing habits: period in which he wrote Heart, L Jim etc.
(proof to me you can be fast ^{as hell} but good)

Browning: Maclm's favorite poet; favorite verse?

Ans seems to me: era of outbreak writer: Rashdie, Kenally, Mo...

Some stay: price intelligence of Nadine Gordimer in S. Af. Soyinka
Others go.

Or I'll dress you in mourning: ghetto kids have always gone to bull rings,
boxing etc. (find in notable entries)

- use Scorpio Rising & a larger entry, life.

- subverts of Garcia Marquez's Macondo(?)

the specific gravity of words

Edmund O. Wilson, Biophilia, p. 79:

--"...in the study of response to graphic designs, the Belgian psychologist Gerda Smets found that maximal arousal (measured by the blockage of the alpha wave) occurs when the figure contains about 20 percent redundancy."

source he cites: Gerda Smets, Aesthetic Judgment and Arousal: an Experimental Contribution to Psycho-physics (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1973)

possible implications for writing: in rhythms; in sense of landscape and weather; in dialogue/dialect, the distinctive turns of phrase.

Tony Angell has told me a rule of sculpture is to exaggerate by 10%.

coincidences - stranger than fiction:

from Malcolm Lowry, by Douglas Day

p. 80 -- at public school -- The Leys -- "his literary ambitions soon came to the attention of one William Henry Balgarnie, an English master who was later to achieve a kind of immortality when another of his students at The Leys, James Hilton, wrote a novel about him: Goodbye, Mr. Chips. Balgarnie was Housemaster of Lowry's house, and also the presiding genius of The Leys Fortnightly, the school magazine. In the early months of his second year in school, Lowry approached Balgarnie and rather offhandedly announced that he had written some pieces which the Fortnightly might like to print. Although customarily only boys in their third and fourth years wrote for the magazine, Balgarnie accepted young Lowry's first efforts; and in the issue of March 13, 1925, appeared Malcolm Lowry's first fiction...."

Robert Burns, Melody Roundup, and Warp Speed, (Scotty)

Fergus Bordewich NYTBR piece abt Burns being revered in China; 1983-4?

Star Trek: Scotty perpetually saying, "We're traveling at warp speed, Captain-- I dinna how long the Enterprise can stand it." Well, how long can the enterprise-- the writing enterprise, the book, the work with language--stand...

Writing about Writing

What your characters do when they're not on the page.

Edward Hoagland, whom I think is one of the most interesting writers on the topic of other writers, a few years ago recalled going to see William Faulkner's house in Oxford, Mississippi. He described Faulkner's writing quarters: "One discovers there a small spartan bed, a tiny writing desk built out from the wall like a shelf, with just enough space for his elbows and an Underwood. The books are a miscellany other authors had sent, the paintings his mother's, the view is whatever scraps of field can be seen beyond the carpet. The lean old Negro who showed me around said that Faulkner 'lived a peculiar life'....'a world of his own'....'all he did was write.'"

I grant that there may be the gravest personal reasons, of family or whatever, why a person may not spend full-time at being a writer. And ~~I'm certain~~ someone out there ^{may be} ~~is~~ about to point out to me that Faulkner himself perpetually had to go off to Hollywood, to get some money by serving as a movie script writer instead of a novelist. I think the significance there, though, is that he did so after his greatest novels were written--some years afterward. My point of view simply is that if you seriously divide your time, by being a teacher or a public relations practitioner or almost anything else, at the same time you're trying to be a writer, you ^{~~probably~~} ~~probably~~ are lessening yourself as a writer. It may be necessary, inescapable--but you ought to be clear what is involved. At least, I have more than ten totally unsalaried years invested in this notion, and so have to believe it, I guess. ^{full-time}

A last point about writering . . . I would say that writering involves taking full responsibility for your own writing. That may sound like a truism, but by "responsibility" I mean the very deep obligation that your work not lose your own faith in it--that you stand by the written work even when the rejections seem to be multiplying instead of just arriving one by one. This example ...

This is hindsight, but I recognize now that the single most important decision during the work on House of Sky was my insistence that the book ~~be~~ ^{take the form of} a memoir. Material such as mine is ~~usually~~ ^{almost always} the stuff of, say, a first novel. Some of the most flattering reviews have said, ~~in considerable surprise,~~ that House of Sky has the pace and scope of a ~~novel~~ ⁿ, and they go on to sound astonished that it isn't. Or the book could have been done as an oral history, or a sociological study on the lifestyles of itinerant ranch employees, or some such.

The only apparent reason why the book ought not to be a memoir--and a few reviewers have said this, too--was that the memoirs of ordinary people just aren't done, aren't of any interest.

Last November, one of the most famous and successful of literary agents spoke to a writer's group in the Midwest. She advised them, "Biographies are selling well now, but they generally must be about people whose names ring a bell with the reader. Reminiscences by little-known people ~~and many others~~...do not do well. 'Are you going to go into a book store and pay \$10 or \$12 for a book about someone you've never heard of?'"

I happened to read that item on a significant day in my life. I had just negotiated the contract for my next book, getting exactly the advance I asked for, even though I had not one word of manuscript on paper, even in prospectus form...

...If there's a single moment when I became aware of the difference between writing and writering, I'd nominate that one.

Anyway, that situation came about because This House of Sky, a reminiscence about not just one but three people ~~known~~ hardly anybody had heard of, and selling for \$10, had very nearly sold out its 15,000-copy first printing, and was being picked up by the Book-of-the-Month Club. The publisher rather liked those facts. I read ^{against} the famous agent's advice against doing what I had just done and thought, "Damn! I'm glad I didn't know that!"

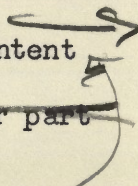
Actually, of course, I did know it, and I resented it mightily. I believe that there are no ordinary people about whom nobody wants to read--there are just people, ^{and people have stories.} The three of us I wrote about in House of Sky happened to have lived lives somewhat out of the ^{usual urban} ~~ordinary~~ routine, but I meet people all the time who have more dramatic backgrounds.

~~people~~
have
stories

A couple of months before House of Sky was published, I met the Harcourt Brace Jovanovich sale representative for this region. She'd read the bound galleys and as we met was very enthusiastic for the book and was pushing it hard among booksellers. But she sized me up and demanded to know, "how old are you?" I told her, and asked why. She said she thought from her reading of House of Sky that I was about the same age as she was, but that my childhood and upbringing had been so wildly different from hers it could almost have been in another century. I politely said, "oh yeh, where'd you grow up?"

She said, "Oh, in the Venezuela oil fields."

It may be, then, that the difference between those of us who have "worthwhile" memoirs and those who don't is that some of us trouble to write them.

But back to my main point...House of Sky remained, to my mind, best told as a memoir even after the first several rejections of the format by major publishing houses...and after the seventh and eighth rejections...and after the ninth and tenth rejections...it was about at this point that Harcourt Brace Jovanovich said, "Well, we don't mind that it's a memoir, we'd like to have it."...but I was prepared to ^{have}~~send~~ that manuscript sent ^{last, full} ~~it~~ around to every publishing house in the country as a memoir. And that's some of what I mean by taking responsibility for your own writing. Compared with any number of other books, House of Sky didn't really have a very tough road into print. Other writers have made, and stuck to, more difficult decisions about format and content  ~~then I had to...but they did make them, did stick to them, and that's a major part of what made them writers.~~

~~Add Backit as~~
modern record

Sand County Almanac
GWTW - Beckett's Murphy, 42 rejections

than I had to ... the modern record I know of is Samuel Becket's novel Murphy, which he sent around to 42 ~~publishers~~ publishers, across more than two years, before getting it into print. But Becket and ^{many many} others did make those decisions about what they wanted their work to be, did stick to them, and that's a major part of what made them writers, instead of people just doing some writing.

It would be nice, I suppose, to end on some ringing thought about the nobility of writing...and writering. But the more I go along in this kind of life, the more it seems to me there's less nobility involved than the day-by-dayness of the job of putting words on paper, and backing them up when they need it. It turned out, as I thought about it, ~~that~~ that what I really... liked best, as an expression of outlook or expectation for someone in the business~~es~~ of writing,

Random Review, '82, Emile Capouya, "In the Sparrow Hills," p. 48:

"I had always thought of Delmore Schwartz as the man who had at the outset the essential gift that most of the poets who were his exact contemporaries never chose to demonstrate, the ability to make a great line. He made only a half-dozen of them, but they are perfectly diagnostic for poetry. One would be enough--'The scrimmage of appetite everywhere.' That line is Dantesque."

see also: WHATEVER IS MOVING, Howard Moss, "First Lines," p. 84♦--especially on Jarrell's 1st line of Woman at Washington Zoo.

a great single line: CAKEWALK, Lee Smith, "Georgia Rose," p. 29:

"All that summer long she was out in the bougainvillea, kissing college boys."
--nice alliteration, nice feel of summer, and "bougainvillea" makes a thicket amid the shorter words.

gazelles of poetry, foxes of mystery

The circus of literature: the lions of narrative, [panthers of mystery] griffins
of sci fi, elephants of biography--the magicians of magical realism pulling
things out of the same old hat...

leopards of memoir

--I like to see an author's investment there on the page.

jukebox: in corresponding with Bill Lang in fall '84 about my Mont. Mag article, I half-kiddingly told him not to jukebox the layout--make it over-fancy with devices. It hit home, in that he didn't do it, and now he and Marianne have added to their editing lexicon, "Whatever you do, don't jukebox that SOB."

"...Only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory not history. But man--let me offer you a definition--is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories."

*²Waterland, Graham Swift, p. 53

illustrator Barry Moser, in Pub Wkly, 6 July '84:

--on the life of the arts and the artist, he quotes last sentence of Ch. 32 in Moby Dick (p. 207 in my Modern Library edition):

"Oh, Time, Strength, Cash and Patience!"

--Moser: "I use a camera as a tool to record in a permanent way what my eyes see."

--Moser: "I may not use a single piece of research I come up with, but it's there. It's part of the well I have to dip into. And no matter what I find, whether I use it or not, it all makes the final work richer."

... not very many min. of thoughts... (then goes)

training: deadlines (a book is a set of several hundred deadlines)
write for ear as well as eye (radio TV training) (Philip Howard)
regularity of work (self-unemployed; read #lannery)
good leads (Hokmoel; Grandfather said)
attention to detail (#lannery's ticks) (my own underlining)

What doesn't translate from jrm into fiction: cold bloodness,
(Arden & Von Hoffman) impartiality

es. of how words etc. o. page

Geo. Vasey: Chidwick says, Kiyuh!

Notes for Boise St. fiction class:

--Henry James as example of dialogue advancing plot. But comment against James is that he chews more than he can bite off.

--Kittredge's point that story ought to develop out of character; "the ~~gleam~~ gleam of the sun on the knife blade made me do it" isn't enough.

--Swan "like pinky in opera glove": Bevis objected, Espinola read it with relish.

Waiting (as in ~~quote~~ quote C is from Wallendas, "Life is the high wire, all else is waiting.")

--preparing, if that's what it is, for a writing stint. Gathering material by notebook, file card, thinking.

Every so often, I will reach to the shelf for a blue-green paperback--I've never been able to find it in hard-cover--and begin to read:

"Hello, ship," Jake Holman said under his breath.

The ship was asleep and did not hear him. He lowered his big canvas thirty-year bag to the ground and stood there in the moon shadow of a brick wall and had his long first look at her. She looked stubby and blocky and topheavy down ~~there~~ there at the edge of the black, rolling river, and she was all moon-white except for her slender black smokestack that rose very high, high as her two masts. Four guy wires slanted down from the stack like streamers from a maypole....It was after midnight and they were asleep down there, all but the watch. In a few minutes he'd go aboard and find a bunk and wake up with them in the morning like a strange bird in their nest.

I think, there...is a story on its way. The story of the sailors who call themselves the Sand Pebbles, and of their ship, the U.S.S. San Pablo, and of this man called Jake Holman. It is the one novel Richard McKenna ever wrote, and it is big and sometimes slow and sometimes clumsy, but beginning to end, it is above all a story, the likes of no other.

to get it
out of way,

First, about writing. By now an enormous lot is known about how writing is put on the page--how writers work. The four volumes of Paris Review interviews are wonderful on the topic of writers' habits and outlooks and quirks. So we know that John Steinbeck would write only with a certain kind of round pencil, and that Ernest Hemingway ^{generally} stood up to write. Really, then, if a person stood ^{long} around ^{start to} enough, holding the right kind of round pencil, great things ought to happen.

But they don't, because while we know everything about how the words get ^{onto} the page, the mystery is how they get out from behind the eyes and down the arm and into the fingertips...and then emerge.

...the single, running, all-embracing manner of the storyteller. The manner of the storyteller must have a certain imperviousness. His fictional reality must replace the real.

--Alastair Reid

My business is to turn days into words. Whether this is a worthwhile proposition is not definite, but the days would turn into something else anyway.

The Review: Grandfather said:

Eric Ambler: The warning letter came on Mon., . bomb
itself arrived on Wed. It became a busy week.

Moby Dick-- Call me Ishmael. Some years ago--never mind how long precisely--
having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular
to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and
see the watery part of the world.

Out of Africa - I had a farm in Africa...

leads: first-footing

--as in Scottish tradition, and giving the book its initial foundation

The Habit of Being--Flannery O'Connor

p. 368--I suppose half of writing is overcoming the revulsion you feel when you sit down to it. All through the middle section of this last novel (The Violent Bear It Away) I had to wade through tides of revulsion every day. It's the curse of any long piece of work. If you are 3/4 through, the worst is behind you. Buy yourself a bunch of carrots and when you must eat, eat them raw, making as much noise as you can. The nearer you can sound like Bugs Bunny, the better. This will soon kill your desire for excess eating...

The first is very basic--the weather. Winter Brothers is a kind of day-by-day journal of the winter of 1978-79.

That particular Northwest winter more than came through for me. There were periods of brilliant frosty weather, and of various moods of rain, and of fat fresh snow at Mount Rainier when I borrowed a cabin there, and of black ice on the highway out to Cape Flattery, at the tip of the ~~country~~ ^{Olympic Peninsula}. There was even a considerable bonus--on Day 55 of my manuscript, a bit of a breeze came along and lowered the elevation of ~~half of~~ the Hood Canal Bridge a few hundred feet below the surface of Hood Canal.

At the same time, as I was gleaning through the diaries of my companion
and diarist
in the book, the Olympic Peninsula pioneer James Swan, there was his weather,
of a century ^{and} ~~or~~ more ago.

The nineteenth of December, 1865, ^{Swan} at Neah Bay: "Crust of ice on the snow...
The Indians have inquired of me frequently during the month when the sun
would begin to return north. They say the fish are all hid under the stones and

27

when the sun commences to come back, the stones will turn over and they will be able to catch fish ^{again}."

4 23

The twenty-second of August, 1883, ^{Swan} in the Queen Charlotte Islands ^{of British Columbia:} "The rain beat through my tent in a fine mist like an umbrella under an eave gutter...while a small brooklet found its way ^{into} ~~under~~ my bed."

The winter itself, then, the regional weather, became as I hoped it would, a pulse of the book, an element of energy for me as a writer. The power of the changeable weather along ^{the} ~~this~~ coast, I hope radiates ^{Winter Brothers.} ~~all~~ through ~~this~~ ^{I think,} ~~book, at least in this case~~ It's not a winter journal which could have happened in Anaheim or amid ~~that~~ Chicago slush.

Swan
p. 28 follows →

3 min

Life isn't all implication. Sometimes it's pretty plainly spelled out. Even James Joyce is plain-spoken in the epiphany of "The Dead."

Home before Dark, by Susan Cheever

77--My father's intense concentration on what you can see and hear and smell and touch was at the core of his gift as a writer. He focused on the surface and texture of life, not on the emotions and motives underneath. In creative-writing classes, teachers always say that it is important to "show" and not "tell." My father's work describes the way people live, and the way he lived. It never tells.

--my note: this makes for a bloodless, morally neutered prose, which Cheever's seems to me to be: small woes of suburban living get equal treatment (which has the effect of magnifying them) with life's real problems. And all endings are enigmatic or listless, nothing is ever summed.

--damn it, the world's main problem is not ennui.

Minimalism etc. is just fine if you figure the reader doesn't have anything to do with what you write.

"MacCarthy was light-headed that night when he set out from Judy Conlon's cabin in the Acres of Killala. Not drunk at all, but light-headed. He carried with him an inch or two of whiskey, tight-corked in a flask of green glass, and the image which had badgered him for a week. Moonlight falling on a hard, flat surface, scythe or sword or stone or spade. It was not an image from which a poem would unwind itself, but it could be hung as a glittering, appropriate ornament upon a poem already shaped. Problems of the craft."

Well,

Listen to those K's go off in "tight-corked in a flask" and then the G's of "green glass" echo against each other. A line of prose Yeats would have been glad enough to have as poetry. The poet being badgered by the image in his mind--moonlight on scythe or sword or stone or spade. There is place in that paragraph--the Acres of Killala, Ireland--but it is the language that pulses in the reader's mind.