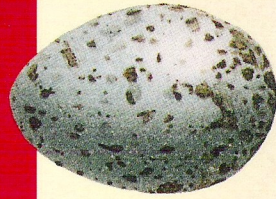


NATIONAL BESTSELLER



Anne
Lamott

Author of *Operating Instructions*



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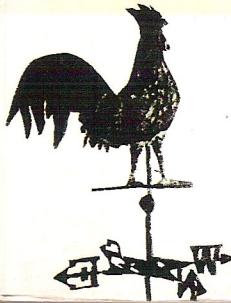
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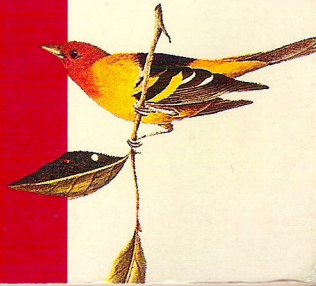
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*Some Instructions
on
Writing and Life*



asking yourself, Now what happens? The development of relationship creates plot. Flannery O'Connor, in *Mystery and Man-ners*, tells how she gave a bunch of her early stories to the old lady who lived down the street, and the woman returned them saying, "Them stories just gone and shown you how some folks would do."

That's what plot is: what people will up and do in spite of everything that tells them they shouldn't, everything that tells them that they should sit quietly on the couch and practice their Lamaze, or call their therapist, or eat until the urge to do that thing passes.

So focus on character. What happens in Faulkner's books, for instance, arises from the nature of his characters, and even though his characters are not necessarily people you want to date, they compel us because we believe that they exist and we believe that the things they do are true to who they are. We read Faulkner for the beauty of his horrible creations, the beauty of the writing, and we read him to find out what life is about from his point of view. He expresses this through his characters. All you can give us is what life is about from your point of view. You are not going to be able to give us the plans to the submarine. Life is not a submarine. There are no plans.

Find out what each character cares most about in the world because then you will have discovered what's at stake. Find a way to express this discovery in action, and then let your people set about finding or holding onto or defending whatever it is. Then you can take them from good to bad and back

P l o t

Plot is the main story of your book or short story. If you are looking for long, brilliant discussions of plot, E. M. Forster and John Gardner have written books in which they discuss it so lucidly and wisely that they will leave you howling like a wolf. I just want to add a few thoughts here, things that I pass on to my students when they seem especially bitter and confused.

Plot grows out of character. If you focus on who the people in your story are, if you sit and write about two people you know and are getting to know better day by day, something is bound to happen.

Characters should not, conversely, serve as pawns for some plot you've dreamed up. Any plot you impose on your characters will be onomatopoeic: PLOT. I say don't worry about plot. Worry about the characters. Let what they say or do reveal who they are, and be involved in their lives, and keep

again, or from bad to good, or from lost to found. But something must be at stake or you will have no tension and your readers will not turn the pages. Think of a hockey player—there had better be a puck out there on the ice, or he is going to look pretty ridiculous.

This is how it works for me: I sit down in the morning and reread the work I did the day before. And then I wool-gather, staring at the blank page or off into space. I imagine my characters, and let myself daydream about them. A movie begins to play in my head, with emotion pulsing underneath it, and I stare at it in a trance-like state, until words bounce around together and form a sentence. Then I do the menial work of getting it down on paper, because I'm the designated typist, and I'm also the person whose job it is to hold the lantern while the kid does the digging. What is the kid digging for? The *stuff*. Details and clues and images, invention, fresh ideas, an intuitive understanding of people. I tell you, the holder of the lantern doesn't even know what the kid is digging for half the time—but she knows gold when she sees it.

Your plot will fall into place as, one day at a time, you listen to your characters carefully, and watch them move around doing and saying things and bumping into each other. You'll see them influence each other's lives, you'll see what they are capable of up and doing, and you'll see them come to various ends. And this process of discovering the story will often take place in fits and starts. Don't worry about it. Keep trying to

move the story forward. There will be time later to render it in a smooth and seamless way. John Gardner wrote that the writer is creating a dream into which he or she invites the reader, and that the dream must be vivid and continuous. I tell my students to write this down—that *the dream must be vivid and continuous*—because it is so crucial. Outside the classroom, you don't get to sit next to your readers and explain little things you left out, or fill in details that would have made the action more interesting or believable. The material has got to work on its own, and the dream must be vivid and continuous. Think of your nightly dreams, how smoothly one scene slides into another, how you don't roll your closed eyes and say, "Wait just a minute—I've never shot drugs with Rosalyn Carter, and I don't even own any horses, let alone little Arabians the size of cats." You mostly go along from scene to scene simply because it's all so immediate and compelling. You simply *have* to find out what happens next, and this is how you want your reader to feel.

You may need someone else to bounce your material off of, probably a friend or a mate, someone who can tell you if the seams show, or if you've lurched off track, or even that it is not as bad as you thought and that the first one hundred pages do in fact hold up. But by all means let someone else take a look at your work. It's too hard always to have to be the executioner. Also, you may not be able to see the problems, because in finding your characters and their story, you are trying to describe something by feel and not by sight. So find someone who can bring a colder eye and a certain detachment

to the project. I had a friend named Al who every so often took other people's cats to the pound to be put down, because his friends couldn't bear to do it themselves. They were cats who were, for one reason or another, like sickness or incontinence, a blight on the landscape. He didn't care one way or the other about cats. He had an imaginary company, whose business was having cats put to sleep, whose slogan was "The pussy must pay." Let someone do this with your manuscripts, help you get rid of the twists in the plot that are never going to work no matter how hard you try or how many passes you make at it.

If I tell thirty students to write me a story about two married people who are considering divorce until something unforeseen happens, they'll give me thirty wildly different stories, because they will have thirty different personal histories and sensibilities. One person is going to write an epiphany story, where the wife sees some wild geese pass in the night, lit by the moon, and suddenly decides to give her husband another chance. Another person is going to write about the moment when the husband, on his morning run, first comes to believe his marriage is worth saving and then is jogging home to share the good news with his wife when he gets hit by a student driver. Another will set the story in Hollywood, because he's been reading Nathanael West recently, and it will be Jewellike in its weirdness. Each writer will come up with his or her own description of what love and life are all about. Some of

these descriptions will be cynical, some rueful, some full of hope. Some will be slow and interior, some will crackle with drama.

Drama is the way of holding the reader's attention. The basic formula for drama is setup, buildup, payoff—just like a joke. The setup tells us what the game is. The buildup is where you put in all the moves, the forward motion, where you get all the meat off the turkey. The payoff answers the question, Why are we here anyway? What is it that you've been trying to give? Drama must move forward and upward, or the seats on which the audience is sitting will become very hard and uncomfortable. So, in fact, will the audience. And eventually the audience will become impatient, disappointed, and unhappy. There must be movement.

You need to be moving your characters forward, even if they only go slowly. Imagine moving them across a lily pond. If each lily pad is beautifully, carefully written, the reader will stay with you as you move toward the other side of the pond, needing only the barest of connections—such as rhythm, tone, or mood.

Now, you may have to use effects and tricks to move things along and to help us remember who each character is—give him a cigar, give her piggy little alcoholic eyes—but if you're faking it, it will show. If you knowingly fake something to get the plot to move forward—if, for instance, you have taken a character you don't understand and given her feelings you don't really feel because you want the plot to work—you

probably won't get away with it. The reader will stop trusting you and will possibly even become bitter and resentful. These are the worst possible things for a reader to become. You must assume that we, your readers, are bright and attentive, even if we have lost the tiniest bit of ground in the last few years. So we are going to catch you if you try to fake it.

If you realize that you have done this, you need to stop and look at your characters again. You've got to go into these people, and since you don't know them, this means that you need to go into you, wonderful you, who has so many problems and idiosyncrasies—you, who will be able to figure out what is true for these people and hence, what they would or would not do in a given situation.

I read a wonderful passage in an interview with Carolyn Chute, the author of *The Beams of Egypt, Maine*, who was discussing rewriting: "I feel like a lot of time my writing is like having about twenty boxes of Christmas decorations. But no tree. You're going. Where do I put this? Then they go, Okay, you can have a tree, but we'll blindfold you and you gotta cut it down with a spoon." This is how I've arrived at my plots a number of times. I would have all these wonderful shiny bulbs, each self-contained with nothing to hang them on. But I would stay with the characters, caring for them, getting to know them better and better, suiting up each morning and working as hard as I could, and somehow, mysteriously, I would come to know what their story was. Over and over I feel as if my characters know who they are, and what happens to

them, and where they have been and where they will go, and what they are capable of doing, but they need me to write it down for them because their handwriting is so bad.

Some writers claim to know what the climax is early on, well before they get anywhere near it. The climax is that major event, usually toward the end, that brings all the tunes you have been playing so far into one major chord, after which at least one of your people is profoundly changed. If someone isn't changed, then what is the point of your story? For the climax, there must be a killing or a healing or a domination. It can be a real killing, a murder, or it can be a killing of the spirit, or of something terrible inside one's soul, or it can be a killing of a deadness within, after which the person becomes alive again. The healing may be about union, reclamation, the rescue of a fragile prize. But whatever happens, we need to feel that it was inevitable, that even though we may be amazed, it feels absolutely right, that of course things would come to this, of course they would shake down in this way.

In order to have this sense of inevitability, the climax of your story will probably only reveal itself to you slowly and over time. You may think that you know what this moment contains—and it makes sense to aim for something—but I recommend that you not fix too hard on what it will be. Fix instead on who your people are and how they feel toward one another, what they say, how they smell, whom they fear.

Let your human beings follow the music they hear, and let it take them where it will. Then you may discover, when you get close enough to peer into the opening, as if into a scenic Easter egg, that your characters had something in mind all along that was brighter and much more meaningful than what you wanted to impose on them.

So aim but not too hard, and when you finally see the climax forming in front of you, *then* you can race toward it.

Lastly: I heard Alice Adams give a lecture on the short story once, one aspect of which made the writing students in her audience so excited that I have passed it along to my students ever since. (Most of the time I give her credit.) She said that sometimes she uses a formula when writing a short story, which goes ABDCE, for Action, Background, Development, Climax, and Ending. You begin with action that is compelling enough to draw us in, make us want to know more. Background is where you let us see and know who these people are, how they've come to be together, what was going on before the opening of the story. Then you develop these people, so that we learn what they care most about. The plot—the drama, the actions, the tension—will grow out of that. You move them along until everything comes together in the climax, after which things are different for the main characters, different in some real way. And then there is the ending: what is our sense of who these people are now, what are they left with, what happened, and what did it mean?

A formula can be a great way to get started. And it feels

so great finally to dive into the water; maybe you splash around and flail for a while, but at least you're in. Then you start doing whatever stroke you can remember how to do, and you get this scared feeling inside you—of how hard it is and how far there is to go—but still you're in, and you're afloat, and you're moving.