Literature and Research Writing

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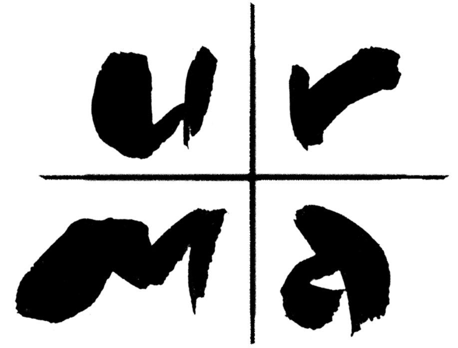

What have I learned by reading literature that applies to my day job?

Hmmmmm.

Just about everything that matters to the quality of my prose I guess. I'll pretend these learnings can be reduced to lessons—just three, of course.

Lesson one: good writing is fact-packed.

Listen to Joan Didion marshal facts in an essay titled "Santa Ana:"

> "There is something uneasy in the Los Angeles air this afternoon, some unnatural stillness, some tension. What it means is that tonight a Santa Ana will begin to blow, a hot wind from the northeast whining down through the Cajon and San Gorgonio passes, blowing up sandstorms out along Route 66, drying the hills and the nerves to the flash point. For a few days now we will see smoke back in the canyons, and hear sirens in the night. I have neither heard nor read that a Santa Ana is due, but I know it, and almost everyone I have seen today knows it, too. We know it because we feel it. The baby frets. The maid sulks. I rekindle a waning argument with the telephone company, then cut my losses and lie down, given over to whatever it is in the air. To live with the Santa Ana is to accept, consciously or unconsciously, a deeply mechanistic view of human behavior."

Besides the power of fact, the passage demonstrates the nimbleness of mind behind good prose. Didion whips us around the terrain of L.A. in jumpcuts from sandstorms to sullen maids to telephone arguments. Then, without warning, she leaps up toward meaning.

Lesson two: good writing possesses that unmistakable sound called voice.

The words queue up in ways that snitch on the writer. Joan Didion can be full of sadness and ennui—or chilly. William Faulkner is grandiose, theatrical, obsessive, abrupt. Brian Doyle, at the University of Portland, the sweetest writer in higher education public relations, is wry, lyrical—even, at times, buttery.

Every great writer sends dispatches from a particular universe of experience, feeling, thought, vision, a universe detectable in such variables as diction, syntax, irony and subject matter.

By divulging this, you risk ridicule, accusation. Voice is where you really, really show.

What sound do you make when you write? What universe do you broadcast from? Reading great writers makes you wonder that.

Lesson three: good writing depends on one's asking good questions.

Good writing also raises questions that are exciting for readers to entertain.

The poet Ezra Pound, a big fan of Benito Mussolini and a real lunatic, nevertheless wrote a charming book, called *The ABC of Reading*, published in 1934. At the opening he tells this story about Louis Agassiz, Charles Darwin's opponent.

Seems that a graduate student went to Agassiz to learn from the great man. So Agassiz handed the student a small fish and said, "Describe it."

The student said: "That's a sunfish."

Agassiz said: "I know that. Write a description of it."

After a few minutes, the student came back with a textbook description of *Icthus heliodiplodikus*.

Agassiz said: "Describe the fish."

The student then wrote a four-page essay.

Agassiz said, "Look at the fish."

After three weeks, Pound writes, the fish was badly decomposed, and the student finally knew something about it.

Staring long and hard at things is a virtue shared by poets and scientists. It is the way they interrogate the world.

How are we research writers to stare? We may use the eyes in our heads, if we wish. Personally, I don't do that anymore. I don't go to labs. To see what? Computer terminals? Pipettes? Petri dishes? Unreadable smears on slides maybe? White rats? What for?

Instead, I use questions to look into the laboratory, into the investigator's mind, into the worlds of meaning she creates. Questions, in other words, are my eyes. Questions are the way I stare at the fish.

Then I turn around and build a picture to allow a reader or listener to stare at the fish, too, to ask his or her own questions of it. I like the idea that I might infect someone with inquisitiveness, that I might be a vector for a virus called curiosity.

Here's the start of a radio column I wrote based on careful questioning of a source who was in charge of a peculiar kind of business. As you listen, imagine what I asked in order to discover the facts that you hear:

> *A brain bank needs rules.*
>
> Mike Handler wants a brain to arrive no later than 10 hours after its owner's death. The average at the KU Medical Center brain bank is 4.4 hours. DNA and RNA disintegrate rapidly, so ideally Handler would like a brain chilled to 4 degrees Fahrenheit within two hours of death.
>
> When a brain reaches him, he cuts it apart in ways determined by a research protocol and the needs of investigators.
>
> It's tricky. Fresh brains, he says, are like jelly. Sometimes he uses a spatula to handle the parts.

You'll never be a better writer than the questions you ask.

I have one final point to make about questions. Before I make it, though, listen to novelist William Faulkner at the start of *Light in August:*

> Sitting beside the road, watching the wagon mount the hill toward her, Lena

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> thinks, 'I have come from Alabama: a fur piece. All the way from Alabama a-walking. A fur piece.' Thinking although I have not been quite a month on the road I am already in Mississippi, further from home than I have ever been before. I am now further from Doane's Mill than I have been since I was 12 years old.

What's Faulkner doing here? He is putting us inside a character's head and inviting us to ask ourselves questions about her. Is Lena poor? If she weren't, wouldn't she have a wagon like the one she's watching come up the hill? Or a horse? She must have been desperate to leave her home, or else desperate to get somewhere else, in order to proceed on foot, right? She isn't lettered, so can she take care of herself out here so far from home? Is her seeming bravery a mask for fear—a fear too deep to feel?

Faulkner drops us right into the middle of her life. He knows what's going on; we don't. These poles—of knowledge and ignorance—create a strong attraction between his mind and ours. The attraction draws us through text.

One of my own story openers was intended to provoke this kind of response. I wrote:

> The explosion was so hot that it melted David Hurlbut's hard hat. Eyelids were his first graft. An eyelid graft should match neighboring skin—but facial skin is darker than other skin. Facial skin is also the only kind that blushes. "If you can avoid grafting on the face," says resident Rich Bené, of the KU Burn Center, "you'd like to."

Questions: What kind of fire is hot enough to melt a hard hat? How does a person survive that hot a fire? How is an eyelid graft performed? Could I survive severe disfigurement? (A picture of a badly disfigured David Hurlbut ran with the story.) Why is facial skin darker than other skin—why did nature make that arrangement? Why has evolution preserved our ability to blush? What's the survival value in that?

Summary

Reading Pound on Agassiz suggests to me that great writing demands deep interrogation of a subject.

Reading any great novel's opening paragraphs suggests that great writing raises questions that are pleasureful for readers to entertain.

Reading Didion suggests that we pack what we write with facts and, from that platform, leap gracefully toward meaning.

Reading Faulkner or Didion or Doyle instructs us that great writers have a signature sound. We do not so much coin this sound as discover it in practicing our craft day in and day out.

Doyle writes to me:

> "When I was young I wanted a style, and so, as Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, 'played the sedulous ape' to Kerouac, Melville, Orwell, Flannery O'Connor, Joyce Cary, Twain—but then I just kept writing, trying to tell true stories, and soon forgot that I was looking for a style, and then a style came to me, which I assiduously ignore and do not cultivate and do my best to forget. I just try to tell true tales in as short a space as possible."

To engage steadily with literature and to practice writing often results in an increase in the authority of one's own voice.

The danger is that authority will turn into dogmatism and bullying.

To remedy that read a terrific book. It'll humble you faster than anything.

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