

owner's eye. There is no burking such an inaccuracy. In case the police work was fundamental to the plot. You construct an inaccurate mainspring and hope that the villain will work.

These, then, are the simple precepts I would suggest. In a detective story, keep your eye on the ball. I am not suggesting that the author should cultivate dullness as a virtue. I merely constructed detective story can be every bit as interesting as a thriller. To restore Dorothy Sayers her *strong Poison* is a superb example of the genre. There are a few subtle frills, but no diversions from the strong central thread of the plot. And the police and the judiciary remain intact until almost the finish. Perhaps Cyril Hare had had a word with her.

In a thriller, the plot, though important, is secondary. What matters is the atmosphere of the battle and the chase. Slap on the brightest colors in your palette; pull out the big stops and go. The sky's the limit, if you can get there. And don't worry about detail if detail matters.

Do other writers heed these pronouncements? Most undoubtedly. Writers make up their own rules, which accounts for the wide variety of their products.



Shut Up and Write

Donald Hamilton

Writers talk too much. At least beginning writers talk too much. I was a very chatty young fellow when I was starting out. Now, after fifty years of writing, I'm practically tongue-tied—well, as far as the subject of writing is concerned.

I've learned to keep my mouth shut about it because I've discovered that after thirty-odd novels I still know nothing about it; nothing, that is, that I can impart to somebody else by word of mouth. I suppose it's in my books and if you want my secret formula, look for it there. Don't come around asking me about it. I don't know what it is. I don't think any writer does.

What I'm trying to say is that young men and women starting out in the writing field seem to labor under the delusion that what they're striving for is a skill that can be taught, if they can just find the right expert to teach them. They think it's like swinging a golf club or shooting a trap shotgun or playing a musical instrument. Keep your head down when you swing or shoot, keep your head up at the typewriter, and you'll be another Jack Nicklaus or Rudy Erchen

or Ernest Hemingway. Arch your wrists just so as you tackle the piano keyboard, or the word processor keyboard, and you, too, can be a Paderewski or Shakespeare or John D. MacDonald.

If only it were that easy! The fact is that no one can tell you how to put the right words onto the right places on the page to form a convincing scene or character; certainly no one can tell you how to do it with style and humor enough to hold the reader's attention. And no one can tell you how to take that scene and character, and other scenes and characters, and combine them into a reasonably convincing plot. It's your story, and you're going to have to work it out for yourself, God help you.

This is not to say that the experience of other writers is totally useless to you. There are several areas in which the budding genius can often be helped by the old pro. The marketing side of literature is one; the mechanical side is another; and then there's the simple question of morale.

With respect to marketing, I can't tell you how or where to sell your stuff these days. It's a very long time since I sold my first story. Everything has changed in New York, and not for the better as far as the beginning writer is concerned; so you'll have to look elsewhere for guidance. The mechanics of writing—the actual machinery employed—we'll get to presently. Which leaves the question of morale. It's very lonely out there in the wild land of the imagination. It's very easy to get depressed and start wondering if you've lost the trail completely; or if, perhaps, you're stuck with a phony treasure map and the cache of literary jewels for which you're searching doesn't even exist, at least not for you. Well, as I just indicated, this is a bleak country—the land of the learning writer—through which no one but you can guide you; but sometimes it helps to know that you are not entirely alone, that others have found their way across this wilderness before you....

I can't remember when I wrote my first story. I recall that, very young, I used to scare my even younger sisters (three of them) on stormy nights by making up appropriate horror tales to curl their hair. I must have been writing in high school because I remember clearly buying an instruction manual called something like *How to Type or Touch Typing Made Easy* and fighting my way through it with my parents' enormous old Underwood machine which gradually, somehow, became mine. I'd hardly have gone to the trouble just to produce some school term papers, although I used my new skill for that purpose, too. (At first the classroom stuff I turned in was practically illegible with X's and erasures, but the teachers didn't complain too loudly, since my handwriting was even worse.)

I wrote in college; in fact it took so much of my time that my studies suffered and I required an extra year to graduate. My degree was in chemistry; my father said this writing stuff was all very well, but I'd better learn something that would enable me to earn a living. He was perfectly right; and the chemistry supported me, and the family I soon acquired, for several years while I continued to beat on the typewriter in my spare time trying to learn how to write.

By this time, the ancient Underwood had been replaced by a Remington noiseless portable, a quiet little machine that probably holds the world record for unpublished manuscripts. I kept grinding the stuff out and sending it out with return postage. In those days, unsolicited manuscripts were treated politely if not always enthusiastically. I shoveled them out by the bushel, and not one of them came back stamped RETURNED UNOPENED, as I gather often happens nowadays; but in the end they all found their way home with little printed rejection slips. I was trying for the so-called pulp magazines, then in their heyday, but one day an inspiration struck me: what the hell, if I was going to collect rejection slips, I might as well collect high-class rejection slips.

So I took an oddball little love story I'd just finished—oddball because I'd never written that kind of a story before. I retyped it very carefully; after all, we were shooting for the Big Time now. I sent it out with the usual stamped return envelope. I told myself not to get my hopes up, and sure enough, some weeks later, there came my familiar envelope back in the mail. Okay. It had been an interesting idea, but I really hadn't expected it to work. I opened the envelope, just curious to see if *Collier's* rejection slips were noticeably classier looking than those of *Black Mask* or *Dime Western*. But what was inside the envelope, clipped to my MS, was not a rejection slip at all.

It was an honest-to-God letter from a real live lady editor. She wrote that my story as it stood was not quite suited to their needs (I'd heard that one before). But she went on: while *Collier's Magazine* had, of course, no intention of telling writers how or what to write, if I should be willing to revise my story in certain ways (specified) they would be happy to see it again—but of course they would understand if I felt that my artistic vision was complete as it stood, and preferred to leave the story unchanged and submit it elsewhere. However, in any case, they were eager to see my next.

Wow! I was in! Well, almost. I hurried to the portable and made the revisions as indicated (I thought) and shot the story back to the magazine with my fingers crossed. Pretty soon, back it came again; I hadn't quite got the idea, but if I'd try this way... The patience of that editor was monumental. We rewrote that damned little love story together seven times by actual count, and I was beginning to lose hope; I didn't really seem to be catching on, no matter how hard I tried. But one day there arrived from *Collier's*, not the usual big manila envelope heralding the return of my latest revision of the story, but an ordinary letter-sized communication—although ordinary isn't exactly the word. When I ripped it open hastily, out fell a check for seven hundred and fifty dollars.

Along with the check was a letter from the magazine's editor-in-chief thanking me for my story and warning me in fatherly fashion against certain perils I might now encounter as a promising young writer; I should be particularly careful, if I chose to go with an agent, not to get involved with certain predatory types who batted on fledgling authors. I took the hint, consulted a brother-in-law in the publishing business, and got in touch with the agent he recommended, a very fine lady who did very well for me until she died some thirty years later.

Anyway, I was a writer, dammit. I sold another love story to *Collier's* and those were the only two love stories I have ever written and I have no idea where they came from. I sold a hardcover mystery novel that didn't do much, but then I sold a long suspense serial to *The Saturday Evening Post* and I was really on my way. The little Remington noiseless was retired to the closet where it still rests, a valued old friend and a reminder of those breathless early days. Its place was taken by a giant L.C. Smith office machine, which was replaced by another when it got shaky, although I think the name had been changed to Smith-Corona by that time. Electric typewriters appeared on the scene at reasonable prices, a boon to tired fingers, but not exactly durable in the early models. I switched over immediately, and I went through more Smith-Corona electric portables than my memory can keep track of...

But meanwhile. Back at the ranch. I mean, literally. You'd think that having got hold of a good thing, suspense serials, I'd stay with it; but Westerns had always been among my favorite reading and what the hell, if Zane Grey could do it, why couldn't I? So I sat down to do some heavy historical research—I already knew the country from camping and fishing through it as a boy—and I found that learning how those people really lived, dressed, and thought wasn't easy. First of all you had to dismiss from your mind everything you'd ever seen in the movies. (A real Western lady of the

late 1800s, strolling down the main street of any real Western town in skintight jeans, current Western heroine fashion, would have been tarred and feathered and transported to the city limits on a rail as a menace to the morals of the community. A real Western lady wore voluminous skirts and petticoats down to yonder, and if you were that kind of sneaky creep you hoped, just hoped, that a wayward breeze would give you a brief, titillating glimpse of her ankles.)

Well, I finished that Western and sent it off with my fingers crossed, just like that early experimental love story. Again my gamble paid off. In fact I hit the jackpot. Not only did the novel sell as a magazine serial for a nice sum, but the movies took it. Naturally, I couldn't neglect this profitable vein of literature. On the other hand, I didn't want my name associated entirely with Westerns, so I started alternating them with suspense stories and doing just fine. If there were warning clouds on the horizon, I didn't see them, but suddenly the storm hit and *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post* were swept away along with several other big glossy magazines that had seemed as permanent as the Rocky Mountains. With them vanished all my best markets.

However, my magazine serials were already being reprinted as paperback novels. Fortunately for me, the publishing house involved was trying something that was new at the time: a line of softcover first editions. The editor, one of the best I've known, was a man with whom I'd worked when he was at *Collier's*. He liked my stuff and continued to buy it, so I wasn't entirely homeless. The paperback pay at the time was, of course, nothing like that of the big defunct magazines; but it was money, and for some years I worked hard and, with my wife helping out by teaching in the local school system, managed to keep solvent by turning out Western and mystery paperback novels as fast as I could. But while we were scraping by, we certainly weren't getting rich or famous.

Then one day the phone rang. It was my editor in New

York, the same guy, telling me that my latest suspense effort was okay, in fact quite passable (he wasn't a gent given to superlatives), but there was a problem.

"You can't call the guy George, dammit!" he said. "Nobody wants to read about a George!"

I thought for a moment. Some names popped into my head from long-ago Sunday school lessons: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. "How about Matthew?"

"Matthew? Matt? Matt Helm? Okay, that's not bad, we'll make the changes. Oh, and I have an idea. If you want to take a crack at using him again, maybe we can turn him into a series character, but you'd better get rid of his wife and kiddies...."

So Matt Helm was born. I'd created him in the first place as a one-novel hero because I was getting tired of writing about mild antiheroes who, after being kicked around for most of the book, finally pulled up their socks when cornered in the last chapter and managed to save themselves and the heroine. Apparently the nation's readers were also looking for a more positive literary protagonist. Matt Helm took off in a very satisfactory manner; he saw me through the next twenty-odd years in great style, and he is still doing well for me.

That's one writer's story. Now let's analyze the experience and see if it has anything to teach a young would-be author starting out today. Unfortunately the first lesson that emerges is that it doesn't hurt a bit to be lucky. I just happened to be the right beginner with the right stories at the right time; twenty years earlier or later I'd never have made it, at least not that way. I was writing rather polite boy-and-girl suspense and chase yarns at a time when the big glossy magazines were looking for just such material. I took a chance on Westerns and hit a wave of interest in those. I managed to come up with Matt Helm when a rougher type of character and story was becoming popular.

I could kid you that I studied the market carefully each

time I sat down to write a new story or decided to branch out in a new direction, but the fact is that I just wrote what I damn well felt like writing, and in each case it turned out that what I felt like writing was what some editor felt like buying. I had also, obviously, been loaded with luck in the first place to hit that incredibly patient lady at *Collier's* who helped me with my first published story, and I've been pretty fortunate with my editors since. So let's not blink at the fact that a hard-working, functional rabbit's foot helps.

But I will take credit for making a few correct moves. First of all, I was persistent. I kept on writing the stuff and shooting it out even when it kept bouncing back with yo-yolike regularity. Even after my first story was published there were times when the cupboard got pretty bare, but with firm support at home I managed to work my way through those tough patches. I know a young woman who consulted me about the MS of her first book, which I considered quite good, although I'm not an expert on the romance field. She sold it, and one more, but when I met her a year or so later, she said she'd given it up. She'd had to work too hard—writing at night and holding down a regular job in the daytime—and disrupt her life too completely for the few thousand bucks involved. It didn't look as if she were going to become another Danielle Steel very soon, so she was bowing out. Well, I knew exactly what she meant; I'd been there, too. The difference between us was simply that I couldn't really conceive of a life that didn't involve writing, while she could.

The next thing I did right, I believe, was letting the right person give me a hand when I needed one. There are two questions involved here. The first is: Who is the right person? The answer, as far as I'm concerned, is that the only person to whom you should listen, when it comes to revising your material, is the person who'll buy it if you get it right. This lets out all writing teachers, as well as relatives, friends, and famous authors passing through town. Their opinion

of your deathless prose means absolutely nothing, because they've got no cash to pay for it and no presses to print it on. Forget them.

The same goes to a certain degree even for agents. You've got to satisfy an agent to some extent before he'll handle you, of course, and where business transactions are concerned his world is law, but don't take his literary opinions too seriously. One of my few unpublished stories (not counting that early flood of rejections) was written on the advice of the lady agent just mentioned. She had a specific editor in mind for it, but unfortunately he left the magazine in question before we could get it to him and nobody else ever liked it, including me. From then on we settled, in friendly fashion, on a clear division of labor: I wouldn't tell her how to sell the stuff and she wouldn't tell me how to write it.

But even assuming that you can find an interested editor to advise you, will you take his advice? This is question number two. There are writers who won't change a single one of their lovely, priceless words for anybody. I know one whose name you'd probably recognize who'd be much better known if he wasn't so stiff-necked about revising his stuff to comply with editorial requirements. There even seems to be a popular feeling to the effect that it's a bit shameful for a writer to alter his material on demand. What's the matter with me, mangling the perfect fruits of my genius just because some jerk behind a big desk tells me to? Ain't I got no pride, no literary integrity?

If you'll excuse the crude word, that's bullshit. I'm not writing as a hobby, to amuse myself; I'm writing to entertain the folks out there. If my story never reaches them, for whatever reason, it's a failure. If a little revision is the price I have to pay for getting the piece into print, so be it. But the fact is that very often a good editor can see the flaws in a story more clearly than the writer, who's too close to it. In many cases (hush, don't tell anybody) my final stories have

been considerably improved by the cutting and revising suggested by an editor.

So I made the proper moves here. I didn't waste a lot of my early writing life soliciting advice from folks whose advice didn't matter, but when I was fortunate enough to attract the interest of someone whose help actually counted, I jumped at it. I have a hunch that my eager and cooperative attitude—the fact that I might just possibly develop into a useful author who'd be easy to work with—may have had something to do with that first sale. It really wasn't much of a story, and we never got it quite right, but it's possible that somebody in the *Collier's* hierarchy decided that they'd stretch a point and take it anyway, and get the poor guy off the hook so he could stop fiddling with this one lousy little yarn and write them something else, better. Which I did.

Another thing I managed to do right was mastering the basic mechanics of my craft and learning how to type with reasonable speed and accuracy quite early in my literary career—in fact, before my literary career had really begun. To be sure, Ernest Hemingway did pretty well with a pencil, but one can't help wondering if we wouldn't have had at least a few more great Hemingway novels if he'd started out by learning a speedier system of getting his thoughts down on paper. Nowadays, of course, the word processor is the thing, and I suspect that any aspiring author who doesn't buckle down and learn how to use one is handicapping himself seriously. The only trouble is, as far as my own work is concerned, that after a lifetime of working on paper, I can't transfer my affections to that lousy little screen. I have therefore settled for a big IBM memory typewriter hooked up to a disc drive that gives it an unlimited word-storage capability.

But the luck factor is always with us, from the brain cells we're handed at birth to the breaks we're given later in life. No matter what moves you make, you may not make it. I know a very nice young man with a very nice wife who, as

far as I could see, did everything right. They lived on a boat in the marina where I keep my own sailboat. The wife worked in the local ship chandlery. For a long time I didn't even know what her husband was doing, although as unofficial author-in-residence I was often approached there by budding writers who hoped I could give them at least a glimpse of a corner of the magic formula for writing success.

Later, I became pretty well acquainted with this pleasant couple and he admitted that he was writing, but he never asked for advice or help; he just kept plugging away stubbornly. I knew he'd got as far as arousing the interest of an agent, not always easy to do these days, but apparently the big break never came in spite of his dedicated persistence. The last time I visited the marina, his boat was gone. I asked and was told that he'd given himself a certain number of years in which to make it, but his time had run out so he'd moved ashore and gone back to the kind of work he'd been doing before. Which brings up the important point my father made: writing is all very well, but when you're starting out it's advisable to have in reserve some other way of making a living. At the very least, as in my case, it can keep you going while you're learning your literary trade.

To balance this downbeat story, let me finish here with a tale of success. A few years ago I was asked to read, and comment on, the manuscript of a first novel by a young woman I didn't know. It's something I try to avoid for the simple reason that, as I indicated earlier, I'm convinced that there's nothing much I can do to help. However, I did read the story and send off a rather lengthy critique saying that it was basically a good yarn but certain things—specified—didn't add up, either logically or psychologically. Even though I hadn't been too diplomatic, I got a nice thank-you note; later I got a happy letter saying that the book had been accepted by a well-known publisher who hadn't agreed with my reservations at all, he'd thought it was just great without

any changes whatever. The novel came out to considerable publicity and did quite well. Recently it got very good distribution in paperback.

Which makes me happy, not only for the lady's sake, but because it supports the point I've been making here: it's a big mistake for the beginning author to run around asking the advice of friends, relatives, teachers, and established writers. If that young lady had taken time out to revise her book according to my well-meant criticism, she'd certainly have delayed her success by months, and she might have loused up the story so badly that when she did get it to that editor he wouldn't have wanted it. The fact is that if you're really interested in becoming a writer, you've got no-business wasting your time discussing your stories with stray characters like me. Or anybody else except an editor.

Just shut up and write.



Matters Grave and Gay

Joseph Hansen

In his wonderful essay "The Natural History of the American Writer," Malcolm Cowley says that in childhood many writers experience long, isolating illnesses. I was one of these. At the start of school, September, 1930, when I was seven, streptococcus invaded my small system. Years later, the discovery of penicillin would make strep infections trifling. But back then, medicine had no answers—certainly not medicine as practiced in small South Dakota railroad towns.

Doctors came, stood at the foot of my bed studying grisly charts of skeletons and of flayed human beings with all their veins, ducts, and organs exposed, murmured, frowned, shook their heads, and went away. To be replaced by new doctors who, in their turn, went away, never to come back. The truth was that either I would get well on my own or the virus would invade my spinal cord and kill me. Happily, no one told me this. All I knew was that I felt horrible.

But in the end it meant that since I was dangerously infectious I spent my days and nights, weeks, and finally something like eight long months, alone except for brief visits from