You Know More than You Think You Do: A New Look at “Write What You Know”

by

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“Write what you know” is one of the great war horses of writing advice. Traditionally it has meant to write about only what you have experienced. Thankfully, Jerome Stern, in Making Shapely Fiction, helped expand that definition by explaining that there are many ways of knowing; research and imagination, for example, are two definite forms of knowledge. Stern prefers this statement in reverse: “Don’t write what you don’t know.”

Backward or forward, however, this statement is usually in response to one question: What subject do I write about? Thus, “write what you know” directs a student writer toward selecting a topic — or for the student of fiction writing, toward selecting setting, characters, events. For me, there is another important meaning to the phrase “write what you know,” a meaning that helps me fight writer’s block every morning as I sit down at my desk or computer.

This is my way of defining that statement, “Write what you know.” I describe the picture that’s in my head right now. I write down the words that the voice in my head is speaking, the one idea that’s clear to me at that moment.

We all have stories inside us. Stories are not made like tables, where you assemble all the materials and tools around you and then cut and shape to put those materials together. Stories are not made from the outside but from within. The writer’s goal is to find a way to bring these stories out, to discover what we know.

What follows is an account of the way the dictum “Write what you know” proved relevant in the writing of my first novel:

For several days before I start my novel, “Manion,” I carry around in my mind one particular image: a young woman, seventeen or eighteen years old, standing on the sidewalk in front of an empty city lot; behind her, a few scraps of paper blow against a wire fence, and the sun makes bits of broken glass sparkle. It is a small New England city, most likely in Maine, and thus I decide it must be Portland. The young woman — whose name is Jennifer — has shoulder-length dark hair and a plump, innocent face. Although I somehow “know” it is early summer, she wears a long red wool coat. Two suitcases stand beside her, one on either side like walls for protection. Down the block is a bus station, and she has moved away from it, I surmised, in order to be spotted by whomever she expects to pick her up.

This is the extent of the image; this is all I know. I resist writing it. Instead I worry about all I don’t know. I speculate: Who is this young woman? Where has she come from? Why is she there? Who is she waiting for? I make up answers, but they all seem false. They are intellectual fabrications designed to make me feel less uncomfortable about how little I really know.
Finally I decide to trust that I do know something, and I might as well start by writing it. I describe the image as fully as I can. And when I finish, more images appear. A car pulls up with a man and woman inside. Jennifer leans forward nervously to look in the window, then smiles in relief. "Sorry we’re late," says the woman in the car, and the trunk pops open and the man gets out to help Jennifer with her bags.

Writing what you know requires trust in the process and in the belief that stories are inside us, at a deeper level than the intellect, and once we have written what we know, the act of writing will allow our mind to release that initial knowledge to make room for something else for us to know. It’s writing without fear of consequence, too; we must record what is there at the moment, regardless of whether or not it matches what we think we ought to be writing. As a result, writing what you know can be both frightening and frustrating—but can also provide great rewards.

Sometimes those rewards are as simple as seeing something totally unexpected come together in a story. I wrote a story a few years ago about a 78-year-old man named Charlie who begins having dreams in which every person in his dream is someone he used to know who is now dead. The fact that he is interacting with these dead people in his dreams upsets Charlie, and after the third dream-filled night in a row, Charlie gets up at three A.M. and walks into his back yard. As I was writing that scene, I realized he heard a noise in the bushes, and he wondered if it was the fox he’d seen lurking around the edges of his property the last few days.

I had never anticipated bringing a fox into this story, but since that’s what I knew Charlie thought, I wrote it, figuring if I didn’t find more use for the fox later, I could always go back and take it out.

Over the course of the story, Charlie comes to believe that these dreams are an omen that he is about to die. Near the end of the story, to prove to himself that he is still vigorous, he decides to walk two miles to a bridge over a stream—a favorite spot he and his wife used to walk to when they were younger. For the 78-year-old Charlie it’s a grueling walk in the summer heat, and when he reaches the bridge he decides to go down to the water to cool off. Unfortunately, there’s only a dirt path down the hill, and he stumbles and falls. Lying at the bottom of the hill, injured and shaken, all alone at sunset beneath a lightly-travelled country road surrounded by pastureland and forest, Charlie looks up and sees, on the other side of the stream, the fox.

I did not plan this, at least not at the intellectual level. I simply followed the pictures in my head, recording
what I knew when I knew it, and when Charlie looked up, he and I saw the fox at the same time.

Sometimes, the rewards from writing what you know are enormous. When I finished *Mansion*, I knew that I had written a better book than I'd ever believed myself capable of writing; unquestionably I'd written a better book than I could have ever intellectually created.

For the last few years, I've been practicing an elementary form of meditation before I write. For the first fifteen minutes or so, I try to let my mind clear. Then in the final few minutes, I consciously welcome images into my mind. I do not force them; I try not to struggle. In a sense, I believe I am asking this deeper part of myself to show me what I know. When I have some image, even—as we'll see below—if it's a single shelf on a bookcase, I'll write it down, and trust that once that knowledge is written, more will slide in to take its place.

As a writing teacher, I look for ways to help my students understand that they don't have to have an entire story in mind when they begin to write—they can simply write what they know. In the semester's first meeting of "Introduction to Fiction Writing," I lead students through a visualization in which I ask them to close their eyes and imagine a room. Because this is a fiction class, I tell them this will not be a room they've seen before, even if it looks like one they know. "Try to see the room in your mind," I instruct. "Let it come into focus like a photograph. See colors. Shapes. From where you are positioned, what's in front of you? What's to the left? To the right? Above? What's the floor like? What's the quality of the light?"

"Don't worry," I continue, "if you see only partial images, or even if those images change. Don't worry if there are many blank spaces in your picture. Focus on what you see, not on what you don't."

As the visualization goes on, I suggest the appearance of a character, and then a second, in much the same way as I suggested the room. Eventually I tell students that so long as they have seen something, regardless of how fuzzy, strange or partial, they should open their eyes and begin to describe what they have seen. They should write quickly and noncritically, simply recording. They are like reporters, I tell them, impartially describing the pictures in their mind.

I start with this exercise because I want students to become familiar with the notion of fiction as a process of recording the pictures in their heads. Afterwards, when we discuss how it went, nearly everyone claims to have seen some pictures, and most say their writing came easier and at greater length than it would have had I not taken them through the process.

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Whatever is at work in this exercise, I believe the most important advice I give students is to focus on what they see—what they "know"—and not to worry about what they don't see. I didn't realize how important the advice was until I was speaking with one student who'd had a terrible time with the exercise, and who had ultimately deemed it a failure for herself. "You said I was supposed to be seeing a room," she said, "but all I could see was one shelf of a bookcase. Everything else was blank."

"Did you describe the shelf?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I started to, but then it seemed stupid so I stopped. It was only a bookshelf, nothing around it, like it was floating out in space. But when I tried to see other parts of the room I couldn't see anything."

"You couldn't see the rest of the room," I said, "because you didn't know it yet. What you knew was that shelf. But you didn't write it."

And I heard myself saying: "Write what you know."

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