Writing Fiction: A Self Interview

by

Donald Murray

Over the years Donald Murray, journalist, writer of fiction and nonfiction, and teacher, has given generously of his time to the National Writing Project. In this self-interview from 1983, Murray lets us in on advice he gives himself and his students. Now professor emeritus at the University of New Hampshire, Murray’s passion remains writing.

Why Do You Write Fiction?

Because it feels good to. It is an itch I have to scratch. Grace Paley said, we write about what we don’t know about what we know.” I write about the things I have to write about, the things I don’t know I need to know.

How Do Fiction Ideas Come?

As a line. For example, I recently made this note at a wedding, “She walked to the altar on the torn-up letters and snapshots of previous lovers.” Stories also come from character, an image, from situation (a conflict), and sometimes, as an idea.

Which Is The Best Way For Them To Come?

There is no best way, but I think we remember fiction mostly for character, and sometimes for information (information that teaches us about a world we don’t know), rarely a plot, and, even more rarely, a theme.

What Do You Notice First When You See A Manuscript?

The voice. The line that works, contains tension, a touch of surprise, authority, insight and forward motion. A line that has a voice, a single human voice.

What Do You Mean by Voice?

Intensity. Concern. Point of view. Angle of vision. Voice is the way language is used, but it is much more than that. Voice reveals the writer’s character. It’s knowing and feeling combined.

Does Everyone have a Single Identifiable Voice?

Yes. You can tell a student’s paper in a week or so without the name, but the range of that voice can be developed and extended.

Do You Consciously Seek a Voice For a Story?

Yes. In some ways that’s the most important thing you do. I wouldn’t proceed on any writing until I found the voice of the work. I suppose that is a form of my own voice that fits what is becoming to be said.

How Do You Seek Voice?

You can’t seek it. You have to wait for it, ear cocked, pen in hand.

How Do You Recognize It?

By the way it sounds. You read it aloud. It sounds right. It contains energy.
What Do You See as the Most Common Problems in Student Manuscripts?

They start with pronouns instead of proper names. They write in the first person. A character is alone. A woman is in the kitchen after the family has left, a man in the hotel bedroom after the woman has left. Passive description. A self-pitying monologue. There is no drama. The significant action has taken place offstage.

Is the First Person Easy?

First person is harder than third person. It constrains you. Consider, for example, the problem of describing the I. The I has to become a character, separated from the writer and developed fully. That happens more easily in third person. The beginning writer has to detach himself or herself from what the writer knows so the writer can create a believable, imaginary world. The third person gives the writer some of that detachment.

Should Writing Be More Dramatic?

Yes, in two senses. It should be dramatic in the sense that something significant happens, something important: life, death, fear, love, hate, change.

And it happens between people. A character acts and another character reacts. That’s the engine that makes fiction go.

Do You Mean Dialogue?

Certainly. Dialogue is action. Most stories run on dialogue.

What Should You Remember About Dialogue?

That people speak differently. Make their speech patterns different. Read aloud, and remember that the characters speaking to each other have a shared world. Write: “What’s for breakfast?” Don’t turn to the reader and explain that breakfast is the first meal of the day and that one of the characters likes it and one doesn’t like it. Reveal that through dialogue. “Want an egg?” “We don’t even want to smell you eating an egg.”

What About Exposition and Description?

Leave them in. Do not write chunks of description. Describe through the actions of the characters. Do not exposit; do not explain; show, rather than tell; reveal the story, don’t talk about the story. Let the story tell itself. If you have an idea, write an essay.

You Mean Writing Isn’t Thinking?

It’s a different kind of thinking, a significant and sophisticated cognitive act in which the thinking (the exploring) and the writing are done at the same time, something that usually happens in most good writing in every genre.

Do You Mean It’s a Sort of Dumb Writing?

It can be, but it shouldn’t be, and it isn’t when the writing is good. Fiction is a way the writer can gain distance on experience, stand back and see what life means.

How Do You Organize a Story?

There are a few principles of organization, but they shouldn’t be taken too seriously. Start as near the end as possible. Write in scenes of confrontation.

Each scene answers a question and asks a question. Yes, they are getting married, but will they stay married?

And not too much mystery. The best suspense is not “Will it happen?” so much as “How will it work out?” Inexperienced writers hold back too much: they give so little the reader couldn’t care less. Read “Patriotism” by Mishima.
What About Point of View?

Don't worry about it if it isn't a problem, but if you're getting confused just think where the camera is. If the camera is in my forehead I can see the look of pain on the face of the person across from me, but I can't see the knife in his back. It may help to read Forster's The Art of the Novel.

What Other Books Would You Read?

Few. All of the Paris Review Interviews, the five or six volumes of Writers at Work in print in Penguin Paperback. Probably the John Hersey anthology on writing that is still in print. Nancy Hale's The Realities of Fiction. But books on writing are much less important than writing.

What's the Most Difficult Problem You Have in Writing?

To maintain faith in what I'm doing. Not to judge what I'm writing too early. To let the story mature so it can stand up to my critical eye.

What Would You Remind the Beginning Writer to Do?

To write as little as possible, to get out of the way, to allow the reader to experience the story.

Afterword

In reading this article I had forgotten I had written, I was appalled by the chutzpah of the author who thought he could say all there was to say about writing fiction in two pages. Well, not all, but most.

In a second reading – and third – I found I had little to disagree with, less to add, and that brought on a recognition that we have little to teach about writing. Indeed I – and most other writers – could say in two pages or less what a beginning fiction writer needs to know.

As academics we try to construct Alps of theory and criticism about the act of writing, but the true center of our discipline remains small, changing little since a caveperson tried to hold the interest of those who did not go on the hunt for the beast that is being roasted on the coals.

The longer I taught, the less I taught; the less I taught the more my students learned. They were not self-taught, they were draft taught.

The center of the writing curriculum should be the evolving draft. There is nothing the student of any age needs to be told before the first draft. They need pen and paper – or computer keyboard and computer monitor – and an itch, a question about a discomforting feeling, a disloyal thought, or a disturbing event in their lives they need to answer by story.

Students need to attempt their stories, writing fast enough to escape the censor and surprise themselves; writing at length — twenty-five pages instead of five — or one — so the draft has time to instruct; writing daily so the draft ripens in the hours between the moments when language is recorded; rewriting and rewriting and rewriting until the story they need to tell comes clear to themselves, to a listener, to a reader.

Teachers who write can be helpful readers by responding to the student drafts as they have responded to their own drafts. And fellow students who are also writing can reinforce the lessons being taught by the draft. But the draft is the best teacher.

The evolving draft teaches the student what to say and how to say it as my drafts — this one included — teach me each morning of my seventieth year.

After a morning of writing my novel I may return to that self-interview for the companionship of the workbench. “Yes, that is the way it was this morning.” “That something I'll have to think about tomorrow morning.” “Well, what you say is true, but it didn't work for me this morning.” “Funny you should say that, just an hour ago I was trying to solve the same problem.”

And I turn to my keyboard, send some words to the screen, read what I do not expect, and realize my draft is back at the front of my one-room classroom, pointer in hand, teaching me how to write another draft.