

novel—*Cannery Row* served well as a model, as did *East of Eden*—using the material of their own youth.

Alternate points of view on great scenes in modern fiction also offer a good way to get students to use their imaginations within the firm boundaries established by a master. In one such exercise I ask students to read Chekhov's story "The Kiss" and write the signal scene—the soldier in the dark room receiving a kiss from a mysterious woman—from the woman's point of view. In another I ask them to write an alternative view of Chekhov's great story "The Lady with the Pet Dog" from the points of view of Anna's husband and her Moscow lover's wife.

All this has worked to stretch the students' sense of what they can attempt and what they can achieve with their own prose.

THE EXERCISE

Return to a story you love and replace the author's material with material from your own experience or imagination. Or return to a story you love and tell a different side of the story by experiencing and dramatizing the events through a different character's perspective.

Bret Anthony Johnston

HOW TO NAME THE WORLD: AN EXERCISE IN RESEARCH

IN GRADUATE SCHOOL, I WROTE TRAVEL ARTICLES TO PAY FOR food, rent, and books. Although other travel writers were sent to the Ivory Coast and Fiji, I wrote for a magazine that focused on domestic travel. My job was to write about South Dakota and Nevada and Pennsylvania; my most exotic assignments were Louisiana and Florida. I covered the Hershey factory—and its accompanying theme park—and the C. M. Russell museum and a giant Sam Houston statue, all of which are very pleasant, if comparatively unexciting, destinations. Still, the magazine paid well, and toward the end of my tenure on the masthead, I got to where I could write the articles within a few hours. Better still, I could write the pieces without ever leaving my apartment. I was a travel writer who never traveled. In other words, I was a fraud.

My fraudulence, though, was the decree of the editor. I would've been elated—especially during those long Iowa Januaries—to fly (or hop a freight train, for that matter) south for the winter, but such expenditures were not within the magazine's budget. More affordable was sending me monthly manila envelopes, pregnant with photos and statistical information and state-produced propaganda, and having me fabricate out of whole cloth a trip to the featured

destination. To keep my lights and heat on, and to keep food on the table and gas in my truck, I had to convince the magazine's audience that I had seen firsthand the rare albino alligators through Louisiana's glass-bottomed boats and the streetlamps fashioned in the shape of Hershey's Kisses. I had to, in other words, write fiction.

And my fiction depended utterly upon my research. This was a new concept for me, one that changed forever the way I wrote stories. As a result, I can't remember a semester when I haven't required students in my fiction workshops to incorporate a research element into their fiction. Nor can I recall a story, mine or a student's, that the exercise didn't immediately and exponentially benefit.

But it's never an easy sell. Many writers have been weaned on the "write what you know" idea, and they mistakenly equate research with the antithesis of creativity. Personally and pedagogically, I respect and condone the "write what you know" approach because writers so often know more than they realize; however, research must be viewed as a component of imaginative writing, not its polar opposite. (It's interesting to note that students *expect* to incorporate research into projects for other classes; they think nothing of anthropology or psychology or literature professors requiring outside sources as tools to substantiate and expand their thinking and projects. When writing fiction, however, the idea of venturing outside their own sensibilities seems outlandish and somehow criminal.)

Often, how research manifests itself—or fails to manifest itself—in a project is the difference between a good book and a publishable book. Try imagining John Grisham without that authenticating legalese. Try imagining a Eudora Welty story divorced from her vivid and particular settings (the same for work by Richard Russo, Alice Munro, Toni Morrison, Chris Offutt, Jhumpa Lahiri, Cormac McCarthy, etc.). What if David Morrell's Rambo had just been a

really brave soldier, as opposed to a Green Beret who'd won the Congressional Medal of Honor? What if the details of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* didn't ring so true? (Talk about research: Kesey bribed an orderly on a psychiatric ward to administer electroshock therapy to him so that he could render the experience in a believable fashion for the reader. And my students balk when I send them to the library or bookstore or Internet!) Such successful work depends on research, on buttressing the imagination with an unequivocal foundation in the material world.

Mark Twain said, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug." And I would humbly submit that the same is true of details. Writers most often use research to find the perfect details, pieces of information that simultaneously ground a story and give it wings. Spot-on details elicit readers' trust while drawing them deeper and more completely into the narrative. Then, once the readers are immersed in the imaginary world, the research will work to keep them there, to sustain an atmosphere more real than reality. Isn't that what literature always aims to do? Your job is to take readers to places that they—and often you—have never been.

THE EXERCISE

Return to an unfinished project and ferret out places or ways to incorporate research. You want to strive for hard and fast information, for ways to authenticate and broaden the imaginary events and people you're trying to bring to life. Look for places to be ever more specific, more accurate, in your language. Occasionally you will be able to mine your own areas of expertise—write what you know—though other times will require you to venture outside your own experience; you'll be required to research and write what you don't know, to write what you want to know. Either way,

ambiguity is the enemy here: your job is to name the world; your job, to paraphrase Joseph Conrad, is before all else to make the reader see.

The following is a kind of checklist that you might consider reviewing as you revise your fiction; it should help reinforce the strong parts of your project and it might open new avenues for you to explore. Of course, all of these criteria won't be applicable to every project, but the more you can check off—the more of them that you can logically and smoothly integrate into your narrative—the more affecting the work will be.

- Landscape and setting
- Flora and fauna
- Characters' occupations
- Characters' hobbies
- History and historical events
- Weather and meteorology
- Medical and biological information
- Architecture and apparel
- Technical and scientific information
- Culture and cultural events

Dorothy Allison

UNTOLD STORIES: AN EXERCISE TO GENERATE FICTION

HERE ARE A FEW WAYS I GET MY STUDENTS TO START stories.

Essentially, I make them write a piece beginning with the line “I never told anyone . . .”

The trick is that I change how I set this exercise up all the time. Sometimes I read some brief piece of fiction—first-person, self-revelatory, strong voice. I change what I read as often as I can, trying to choose something they might not have read recently. (I love to pull something from the back of my bookcase—there is a short story taken out of Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* that I used a lot for a while, and a piece of James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. That is the quality of thing I use.)

Then I make them close their eyes, and I let this long silence happen. *That is very important*. Make them a little nervous, so they will focus. Then I tell them to take up their pens and write the first line—“I never told anyone . . .”—and go from there.

They'll write for ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes. If they flag or if I am feeling particularly irritable, I stop them, have them set aside what they started, take up a new piece of paper, and begin again. This time the line is: