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The Writer's Rights & Responsibilities

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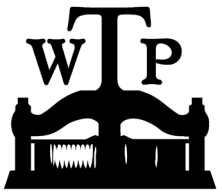

The Writer's Rights and Responsibilities

Originally this address was going to be based on another lecture I gave called "Race and the Writer." Yet as broad as that topic was I felt it was still too narrow, too confining for what I wanted to talk about tonight. I wanted to talk about the broader concerns of the writer's rights as well as his or her responsibilities, when it comes to writing not only about race, but about potentially controversial topics such as gender, sexual orientation, class, age, creed, national origin, religion, and anything else that makes us as a group different from other groups. In short, when we are writing about whatever we view as The Other.

When I began to write, and even more so, when I later began to teach, I subscribed wholeheartedly to the old and sometimes unquestioned adage that writers should write about what they know. After all, knowledge about and mastery of one's subject is at the heart of our ability to write well, to write with confidence, credibility, and specificity, and in a voice that assures readers that they are in the hands of a writer with some authority, an author who is an expert—emotionally, intellectually, experientially, technically. As readers we want to feel this author is not only qualified to tell a particular story or write a particular poem, but that he or she is the *only* person capable of writing it. Readers care that a particular author not only thoroughly understands a subject but that he or she cares deeply and passionately about it. Kurt Vonnegut's advice to a writer speaks to this issue:

> Find a subject you care about and which you feel in your heart others should care about. It is this genuine caring, not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style.

We trust an author to tell a particular story or write a particular poem, because he knows and cares about the thematic landscape of it in his heart better and more deeply than anyone else. For instance, we trust Melville when writing about the sea because we know he spent years at sea; we trust Hemingway to write about war or fishing or hunting because we know he lived his life doing those things. Likewise we trust Nabokov to tell us about butterflies, Frost about New England, Sexton and Plath about the allure of suicide, Mary Karr or William Burroughs about addiction, Nadine Gordimer about apartheid in South Africa, Cheever about the angst of middle-class suburbia, Ernest Gaines on African-American sharecroppers, and Allen Ginsburg or Michael Cunningham about gay life. Why do we feel more assured by these writers when they are writing about these particular subjects? Because they are, we feel, passionate experts in these areas. They've experienced their subject matter firsthand. They can relate to it from the inside out, with intimacy and confidence.

Conversely we might be a bit skeptical as readers when we even suspect that a writer may not know a subject with such intimacy. For instance, when we read a workshop story by a man who is writing from a woman's point of view, or a heterosexual writing about gay or lesbian themes, or a white person writing about the lives of black people, we question their authority. Why? Exactly because we feel that those writers may not know their subject fully; that they haven't somehow "earned" the right to write about those subjects. They are violating that old saw, to write about what one knows.

Of course, if we follow that line of reasoning to write about only what we know to its logical conclusion, then obviously we will soon find ourselves inhabiting an extremely limited imaginative landscape: our own narrow little world into which we were born. For instance, as a white male of sixty odd years, I can only write from a certain narrow perspective, from a particular socioeconomic class, with a particular world view, born into a particular and quite limited cultural and historic epoch. And of course, I can only write about males. How can I possibly know what it's like to be a pregnant woman, a gay man, a nineteenth-century geisha, a whaling captain, a Roman emperor, a Russian female sniper, or someone dying of cancer? Etcetera. Etcetera. Etcetera.

If a writer follows the dictum of writing only what he or she knows, then how do we account for the multifaceted, teeming universe of characters that someone such as Shakespeare created? (And, by the way, this belief in the notion that we must, or can, only write about what we know accounts for all of the nonsensical

conspiracy theories that posit that Shakespeare wasn't the author of his works exactly because he wasn't a member of court, wasn't university trained, wasn't a soldier or court jester, that he wasn't exactly any of his characters). Or how do we account for someone such as Arthur Golden writing so convincingly about a geisha or Stephen Crane writing arguably the greatest Civil War novel, when in fact he was born five years after the end of the war? If we write only what we know, we also run the risk of boring ourselves and thus our readers. As the poet Robert Duncan once said: "If I write what you know, I bore you; if I write what I know, I bore myself, therefore I write what I don't know." If we write only about what we know, we run the risk of sterilizing our imaginative worlds. We run the further risk of losing our ability to imagine what others feel and think and experience. We lose, in short, what I like to call our empathetic imagination—that crucial ability of the poet, novelist, or memoirist to conjure worlds—both inner and outer—of characters very much dissimilar from ourselves. We lose that single most important skill that we need as writers—the ability to put ourselves in the skin of another.

A few years ago, I was invited to head a panel discussing both the freedoms as well as the responsibilities of the writer as they relate to the question of race. I was asked primarily because of a novel I'd just then published, *Soul Catcher.* I was told that the panel was to use my novel as a springboard from which to jump into the deeper and murkier issues surrounding race and the writer, including what subjects a writer can legitimately write about, what subjects are off-limits, and in what ways writers can and should be held accountable for what they write. Briefly, the novel is set before the Civil War and centers around a main character named Augustus Cain, a white southerner who makes his living as a "soul catcher," the term slaves often used for a slave catcher. Cain hunts down a female runaway. The idea for the panel was initiated by a friend of mine named Robin, a university administrator who is African American. She had received a complaint from one of her colleagues (also African American), who had seen the book on her desk and picked it up and, as she put it, after skimming a few pages of the novel, was shocked by the brutality of some of the scenes and the use of the N-word therein. This other person then inquired about the race of the writer, was surprised and somewhat chagrined to learn that it had been written by someone not only white but male. Robin asked her colleague what difference it made, and he said he was tired of white folks writing about slavery. My friend related this incident to me and then asked if I would consider being part of a panel whose goal would be to discuss the general issue of writing about race. She thought it might be profitable for our writing students to engage in an honest and open discussion of the broader issues concerning the writer's responsibilities and freedoms when writing about highly charged topics—topics that as the panel developed, grew to include not only race but gender identity, sexual orientation, the issues of stereotypes, class, etcetera. I cautioned my friend that such a discussion could be very tricky, fraught with the very problems we hoped to discuss. She assured me the risk was well worth it, and I finally agreed. I wished to join the conversation. Not so much to justify my novel to somebody who thought I was an interloper in his territory, but more simply to defend the freedom of any writer to choose his material or to follow his muse.

I looked forward to such a discussion. As fiction writers, most of the time we're too busy, too myopically occupied, too down-in-the-trenches putting words on the page, to take a broader look at our own work and where that work fits into the wider culture. This panel, I hoped, would give me a chance to reflect on and formally articulate thoughts on topics I had been dealing with as a matter of course as a fiction writer and writing teacher for decades. After all, writing that is good and honest, truthful and meaningful should make all of us—writers and readers alike--question our assumptions, second-guess our values, challenge our most deeply held beliefs. Writing, if it's to do its job and not simply advocate for the status quo, should push the envelope of moral, ethical, and spiritual considerations.

Both in my undergraduate and graduate fiction classes, I am, like most writing instructors, sometimes confronted by situations in which student manuscripts seem offensive, at least to some members of the class and sometimes even to me. As writing teachers, we workshop material that sometimes annoys or insults every imaginable group, from the more substantive issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and ethnicity, to those less weighty though still contentious subjects of class, socio-educational level, political association, body image,

or even team affiliation. Like most writing instructors, I've had to deal with women in class being offended by a male writer making certain assumptions about his female characters, assumptions they felt to be insulting, stereotypical, demeaning, or downright wrong; or conversely, I've seen men who were offended by a female writer's treatment of her male characters. We've all been in workshops where a woman declares, usually while looking for support from the other females in class, "That's not how a woman would think in that situation." Or a male student might say, "A guy would never say that. Not in a million years." And then I, as the arbitrator of workshop values, have to negotiate competing views of reality and of fairness, sometimes even when my own views are in conflict. Nonetheless, like some ACLU lawyer who finds himself forced to defend the anti-Semite's right to freedom of speech, I insist that my students have the inalienable right to write about anything they want. I spend a great deal of time in my fiction writing classes establishing a setting wherein student writers can feel free and safe to write; they can be or become any character they want, assume any voice, where they can use their empathetic imagination—a notion similar in some ways to Keats's negative capability, in that, as artists they can be in doubt without reaching after certainty—and they don't have to be constrained by the reality into which they happened to be born. In workshop, I tell students there is no place for political correctness because it is the bane of honest writing, that it takes the easy path instead of the path toward a more complicated and nuanced truth. I tell my fiction students to take risks, assume chances, to write audaciously. I assure them that they may enter into the minds and hearts of any character, any time in history, from the most saintly (I have had students bold enough to take on the voice of Jesus) to the most despicable (another student wrote from the point of view of Hitler); they can be KKK members and torturers, pedophiles, or soul catchers. They may become men or women, young or old, black or white. The only instruction, the only guidelines that I give them—and this is crucial—is that they must do it for the greater good of the story, for the deeper truth that fiction seeks to reveal. In short, they must be loyal to the truth of the narrative. And they must be willing to take criticism about how well, how fairly, and how truthfully they've presented and executed their version of an imagined reality. That is, even if they had laudable intentions they may not have created a world that others view as either credible or as fully realized, or they may have violated that most sacred of a fiction writer's responsibilities—that what they've written is simply not interesting.

I'd always taken as a fundamental assumption that a writer is—and should be—absolutely and unconditionally free to choose any subject under the sun. That a writer's subject, her donné, was hers alone to choose, and that others could criticize not what the author had chosen but how effectively she had treated that subject. Did she treat her subject, her characters, her story, with the appropriate level of realism, with truth, sensitivity, and the appropriate tone and seriousness of purpose called for by the subject? That is, were the writer's basic assumptions in writing about this imagined reality correct and fully realized? Did she do her homework—not only the intellectual and technical homework, but the emotional homework?

Many years ago I came across an essay in the *Writer's Chronicle* that, in its simplicity, challenged many of my own assumptions as a writer and teacher of writing. The essayist was a fiction instructor talking about a single line from one a story by one of his students . The writer had described something as being "flesh-colored." A simple enough and seemingly self-explanatory description. But think about that for a moment. *Flesh colored:* We see such a term in many places and in many contexts. On TV, in various ads. I've seen it even in works of literature. I myself have used this or a similar term. How many of you have used such an expression in your writing, used it without batting an eye, without in the least thinking you were making a political, social, cultural, or racial statement, one grounded in a certain world and cultural view? You might respond to this by saying what's the big deal? That one's use of the term *flesh-colored* in a piece of writing speaks as much about the writer-reader context, that is, the shared assumptions a writer is making about his assumed reader's experience as it does any racial prejudice or lack of cultural sensitivity on the writer's part. But of course, this is complete and utter nonsense. At best such a choice of phrases speaks of the ignorance or at least laziness of the writer; at worst it suggests a not-so-subtle prejudice. Is there any writer among us tonight, or for that matter any writer anywhere, who would not acknowledge, when pressed, that using the term *flesh-colored* is making an erroneous assumption

that either a) excludes any reader whose flesh is not my particular skin color (i.e., white); or b) and more to our purpose as writers, suggests we are being imprecise or, simply, bad writers?

As for the panel, I did my homework. I wanted to be ready to have a thoughtful, honest, and what I hoped was going to be fruitful discussion about the issue of race and the writer. In preparation I dusted off my copy of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as well as the heated response that appeared in its wake by black intellectuals, that volume called *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond.* Both had been published in the late sixties. Many in the black community took issue with the very fact that a white man, and especially a white Southerner, had the audacity to write a book not only about but from the point of view of a black slave. Styron, they argued, didn't have the right to choose this ground to plant his imaginative seeds in, and he was criticized both for his initial choice of centering his novel in the voice of Nat Turner, as well as for how he handled his material and executed the novel, particularly in how he portrays the inner world of a black slave. Some felt that his treatment of Turner relied on racial stereotypes. "For all its prose power and somber earnestness," wrote Loyle Hairston in this volume, "Styron's novel utterly fails the simple test of honesty." Charles V. Hamilton said, "This is meditation mired in misinterpretation, and . . . is history many . . . black people reject." John Oliver Killens wrote: "In terms of getting into the slave's psyche and his idiom, it is a monumental failure." Mike Thelwell said that *The Confessions* "demonstrates the persistence of . . . myths, racial stereotypes and literary clichés even in the best intentioned and most enlightened minds." This book was, in turn, countered by other critics, including a long and dismissive essay in *The New York Review of Books* by Eugene Genovese, who looked at Styron's black critics as attacking the author for nonliterary issues. At readings, Styron was often shouted down by many in his audience. Nonetheless, the book went on to win the Pulitzer Prize. "Race is our common history," said James Baldwin, who had encouraged Styron to write his book on slavery. Years later distinguished black critics such as Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., began to give the novel its due. After reading the various sides of criticism, I thought there was an important and very real distinction to be made, particularly for writers, between Styron's "right to choose his subject" and how well he developed and handled that subject. I felt—and still feel—that we may debate the latter, but we must grant the writer his choice of subjects.

So I attended the panel with high hopes, as much to learn where I myself had overstepped or fallen short, where I had unwittingly resorted to racial stereotypes or wrong assumptions, where I had used the equivalent of *flesh-colored.* Unfortunately, our panel discussion never got very far off the ground. The man who had originally questioned my right to write about a black character stuck to his guns, despite all of my or others' arguments. He said that as a white man, I was treading on territory that was "reserved" for others, especially when it came to those sections he'd first read about the torture or rape of slaves or the use of the N-word. When I asked him if I had made a mistake in the execution, handling, treatment, or reality of my material, he said, "No. That in fact the novel was actually quite well written and that he thought it honestly and fairly portrayed slave life." It's just that he didn't feel that a white, male writer had the freedom to write about the life of a black female slave. I tried to bring up the fact that my main character wasn't actually a black female slave but in fact a white male slave catcher, and that I did this in order to try to get into the mind and heart of a man who could do unspeakably brutal things, to try to imaginatively understand such a soul and how his views might eventually be subject to change. This man responded by saying, "Now that is a subject he could concede to me." As if by simple virtue of being a white male, I'd somehow have a more intimate knowledge of the brutal world of a slave catcher. That is, I could understand that mindset but that I couldn't possibly understand that of a woman who was brave and kind, moral and "normal" in every sense of the word, who just happened to be a slave desiring her freedom. But how, I inquired of my fellow panelist, was I to write about slave catchers without also writing about slaves? Didn't I have to try to get into the minds and hearts of both, that the slave catcher and the slave were linked, the flip sides of the same immoral coin? About this he was less forthcoming. When I questioned him further about the parts of my novel that he found offensive or untrue or stereotypical, he finally admitted, almost as an afterthought, that he hadn't as yet read more than those first few pages that he had found offensive. But, he told me, he very much planned on doing me the courtesy of finishing the novel just as soon as he had

the time. As you can imagine, I was outraged; I told him he didn't have the right to be on the panel, that he was no better than those book-banning folks who don't even read the work they so readily want to outlaw. Our discussion quickly went from bad to worse, with voices being raised; our lofty goal of analyzing this topic fell precipitously into a chaos of accusations and recriminations. The audience, which included both students and faculty, jumped into the fray, taking one side or another, and losing sight of what the panel had hoped to do. I felt then, and feel even more now, that it's a discussion that we as writers must have.

More recently, Tanner Colby, writing in *Slate,* about Michael Chabon's new novel *Telegraph Avenue,* had this to say on the subject of race and writers:

> For all his skills as a novelist, Chabon's whiteness must be reckoned as a disability when it comes to writing about race, an asterisk next to his name. Either he's crazy for wanting to "go there," or, like a toddler learning how to walk, he is to be applauded just for getting in a few good steps before the inevitable stumble. In an otherwise positive review the *New York Times* notes that Chabon is trying too hard "to sound like he was from the 'hood." Slate's own Troy Patterson gently chides Chabon for simplifying race, not because of his whiteness per se, but because of his naive and overly idealistic Berkeley-ness, which really is just calling out one particular brand of whiteness.

Colby goes on to say,

> As for Chabon's white reviewers, they seem nervous about being white people reviewing a book about race, and channel that anxiety into being nervous on Chabon's behalf. In questioning whether or not a white author is capable of writing a book about race, *Los Angeles Times* reviewer Carolyn Kellogg actually lets her racial insecurity undercut her own review, qualifying her criticism to say that, "As a white book reviewer, I don't feel qualified to say he gets it documentarily."

Again, to cite Colby:

> "White person tackles race" shouldn't have to be such a big deal. From Herman Melville to Harriet Beecher Stowe to Mark Twain to William Faulkner to Harper Lee, the grand American narrative of race was always tackled by white writers, writers who created and inhabited black characters as they would any other. Together with black authors who would finally be given a platform in the 20th Century, like Ralph Ellison and Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright, white novelists addressed the issue head on, thoughtfully and meaningfully, thereby leading to a deeper and richer understanding of the country we live in.

Is there such a thing as "cultural ownership"? Has political correctness Balkanized our literature, granting the rights of certain stories and certain themes to certain racial or ethnic or gender identities? Colby talks about Chabon confronting this issue for the first time in his MFA program at UC Irvine:

> That's where I [Chabon] learned it was an issue and that it was something that some people considered problematic . . . If a white member of the workshop wrote something from the point of view of an illegal Guatemalan immigrant—as I recall someone did—there were some people who said there were issues of cultural imperialism involved in doing that, that you shouldn't do that. I understand it politically. I understand the historical context, completely. Artistically, I don't understand it at all. Because if I can't write from the point of view of a black woman nurse-midwife, then I can't write from anybody's point of view. That's why I do this. I use my imagination to imagine myself living lives I don't live and being people who I'm not.

According to Chabon, why writers do this—that is, write from points of view very different from our own—is so that we can use our imagination to put ourselves in lives we don't live, that is, employ, our empathetic imagination.

I believe this is our fundamental right and most important imperative. Likewise, our primary responsibility is to tell the truth, to be honest in our telling, and, like journalists, to strive to get our stories right. Not just factually right, but imaginatively, emotionally, intellectually right. We don't—in fact, we mustn't—remain silent for fear of a misstep, for treading on someone else's imaginative territory, but rather we must try to give an honest reckoning; we must try to give voice to those, often otherwise, silent voices. We must be courageous. We must be risk-takers. We must have the audacity of our imagination and our hearts to enter into any world or any life, and especially into the silent lives of others to tell their stories. And of course our responsibility is to strive to do it with truth and honesty, with compassion and thoroughness, with sensitivity and intensity and, above all, with scrupulousness. Because in the end we make those "other territories and other lives" our territory and our life.

A former MFA student, Ann Marie Somma, wrote a novel about a factory in which dozens of young women were poisoned and died from working with radon in 1917. Ann Marie assumed the voice of one of those young women who perished almost one hundred years ago. Even though those lives were very different from her own, she fought against the silence, the neglect, and the falsehood that surrounded these women, to bring their voices to light. She took a chance of treading on another's territory. As writers we must fight against falsehood and the falsehood that silence breeds. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said in his Nobel lecture:

> We shall be told: what can literature possibly do against the ruthless onslaught of open violence? But let us not forget that violence does not live alone and is not capable of living alone: it is necessarily interwoven with falsehood. Between them lies the most intimate, the deepest of natural bonds. Violence finds its only refuge in falsehood, falsehood its only support in violence . . . But writers and artists can achieve more: they can CONQUER FALSEHOOD! In the struggle with falsehood art always did win and it always does win! Openly, irrefutably for everyone! Falsehood can hold out against much in this world, but not against art.