

## Why We Write

### THE MAN IN THE SHOEBOX

**M**Y THIRD-GRADE teacher asked what we wanted to do when we grew up. “Don’t just tell me what you want to be; show me,” she said. Under her guidance, we made three-dimensional representations of our adult selves in the workplace. One kid slopped red paint on a milk carton and called it a fire truck. Another made a cardboard man, smiling, with a hole punched through his head. “I want to be an assassinated president,” he explained. I made a man out of a shoebox, giving him squinting eyes, a receding hairline, bad posture, and glasses fashioned from a paper clip.


Beneath his fingers I glued a piece of cardboard that was supposed to be a typewriter. Mounted behind his head, a square of plywood suggested an uncomfortable chair. I pasted an index card to his chest and wrote Danny White, Author using a red Sharpie with extra-permanent ink. All I had to do was live up to the shoebox. More than thirty years later my wish came true. At least I thought it did.

I was finishing graduate school in New York City when my literary agent sent me a nine-word e-mail: “Dan, HarperCollins has an offer on the table. Kris.” My wife and I screamed out the window of our roach-infested walk-up on West 122nd Street. Now I was no mere writer. I was going to be a published author. The summer it was released, *The Cactus Eaters*—a true-life horror-comedy about an accursed trip I took on the Pacific Crest Trail—became a best-selling travel book on Amazon. There I was, a man who had made a subsistent living at small local newspapers for fifteen years, covering landfill-board administration meetings, suddenly getting heaps of fan mail. It was like being rich, drunk, high, and eating Ding Dongs at the same time. Two screenwriters contacted me, raising the delicious possibility of dueling *Cactus Eaters* movies. “Don’t sign with anyone else; I’m securing financing!” one squeaked. A close friend’s father liked my book so much that he read it on his deathbed, twice. Stupendously squishy hotel beds awaited me on my book tour. My suite in Portland, Oregon, came with a faux-mink teddy bear on my pillow instead of a mint.

As the buzz for my book continued to build, nonfiction



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author Mary Roach picked me out of the crowd at her Haight-Ashbury bookstore event in San Francisco. “I’m reading your book, and I really like it,” she said. “I’m writing a review.” When someone told me she wrote for the *New York Times Book Review*, I did a jig-and-reel up Masonic Avenue. As for the poor little shoebox man, I should have built an altar to that single-minded scrivener. The truth is, I never even

younger self’s callowness, my bouts of sexism and dreadful decision-making capabilities. Some readers thought I was condoning bad behavior, or assumed my bunions-and-all self-portrait was unintentional. One reader texted me from a Barnes & Noble store, saying he hoped I got Lyme disease and wasted away slowly. “Not only that, but I’m reading your book for free,” he added.

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took him home from my elementary school class. Not knowing how badly I was going to need him, I tossed him in the nearest trash bin.

My fame reached its peak when my hometown bookstore, the Capitola Book Café, near Santa Cruz, California, put my name on its storefront marquee. After my reading, two dozen audience members followed me to the nearby Shadowbrook Restaurant, where we drank gin and tonics and rode a funicular that runs up and down from the parking lot. A rowdy friend shook the cable car, threatening to knock it over. “You cut that out,” a passenger said. I should have taken his fear as a warning: My funicular was about to run off the rails.

Next thing I knew, the dueling screenwriters vanished, never to be heard from again. The glowing *New York Times* review got bumped. Then, out of nowhere, haters descended like vengeful starlings. Overnight, my Amazon page went from shrine to stockade. While appreciative comments continued to roll in, the backlash had far more impact, at least on my ego. In the book, I am unsparing about my

None of these barbs would have mattered to my stoic little shoebox man, but they drove me batty. Daily sales figures of my book became an assessment of my worth as a human. It hit me hard when my book went from supersonic rocket ship to free-falling chunk of Skylab.

In a reactive frenzy, I pelted my agent with follow-up book proposals. One was a travel memoir called “Reverse Immigration.” For this project, I would return to the northernmost point of the Pacific Crest Trail in British Columbia and keep walking north through the trackless Yukon. Then I would take a ferry across the Bering Strait, replicating—in reverse—the migratory trail followed by our hominid ancestors fifteen thousand years ago. Then I would proceed to Eastern Europe, where I would search for traces of my Jewish forebears. “Just think of it,” I said. “A sequel to *The Cactus Eaters*, but with cavemen. And pogroms!” Her one-word response was “Hmmm.”

Then I tried to sell her on a book called “Letters to a Lima Bean,” a collection of wisdom written to my

then-unborn child. “It sounds really scattered,” my agent replied. “I’d really like you to come up with something that somebody would actually want to read.”

All I wanted was to keep being an author. When no projects took, I started to become someone I no longer respected, a carbuncle of cynicism, sulking, ungenerous, unable to cheer on friends and colleagues having their well-deserved nanoseconds in the spotlight. I unsubscribed from the Facebook wall posts of friends and acquaintances who boasted about their Yaddo residencies and publishing contracts. It didn’t occur to me that I had lost something no amount of accolades or sales could have given me: a bedrock sense that my voice was worth hearing and my tales worth telling. Without the joy I used to get from arranging and rearranging words until they rubbed up against one another at odd angles and shot off sparks, I’d have nothing to sustain me.

ONE day, after abandoning yet another project, my attention drifted to a phrase uttered by Tony Connor, a poet and writing professor who taught playwriting and verse at Wesleyan University, which I attended in the late eighties. Twenty-five years before my bout with fickle fame, I read an interview that Connor gave to Wesleyan’s alumni magazine. Asked if he could predict which of his students would achieve literary success, Connor said the ones who succeeded would have “the sheer bloody-mindedness to go on when nobody gives a damn.”

At the height of my postpublication doldrums, I became obsessed with the idea of “bloody-mindedness.” Somehow I sensed this sanguinary phrase would help me retrieve my bearings as a writer. First, I needed to know more. What, exactly, did it mean, and what did it have to do with the writing life? Without a second thought, I e-mailed Professor Connor out of the blue and asked him to explain himself. Almost immediately

I regretted the e-mail. Would he take me for a stalker or a fool? After all, I’d never taken a class with him. We had just one connection: Connor was one of the judges who awarded me a fiction prize in college. That was twenty-five years ago. For all I knew, he had forgotten me.

Two days later, his message appeared in my inbox: “Sad to say, I can’t recollect the particular prize you benefited from, nor do I remember the wise words (or word) you ascribe to me, but that’s not surprising: I’ve been retired for fourteen years. Yes, certainly I’ll speak to you. I’m at home here in Connecticut most evenings if you’d care to ring.”

Connor, eighty-two, was in good spirits when I called him. He had a distinctly gruff voice and a Mancunian accent. “I just had eye surgery,” he said. “My world has been renewed. You don’t realize how your sight is degenerating. I got to the point where I could hardly read the print on a computer screen—it was all kind of gray.” I didn’t want to make light of his condition by telling him I was in a similar place creatively—looking at my computer screen and seeing gray. I told him I’d looked up *bloody-mindedness* in the dictionary; the phrase meant “bloodthirsty,” or willing to inflict or sustain bloodshed in the pursuit of a goal. Connor explained that the British version meant something altogether different: “In the *Bloomsbury Thesaurus*, [*bloody-mindedness*] is listed under *will* as in ‘will of one’s own, waywardness, obstinacy, obduracy, doggedness, intransigence, stubbornness, pigheadedness, mulishness, bloody-mindedness.’”

By way of elaboration, Connor, in the course of the phone conversation and several e-mail exchanges, shared the highlights of a bloody-minded life. Born during an economic global depression in Manchester, England, he had to fend for himself early on. His father walked out on the family when Connor was five, forcing his mother to take in other people’s laundry. Teachers dismissed him as “not worth educating,” so he ditched school at fourteen

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**- Richard Hugo**

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and took on full-time work in a textile-design studio and, at one point, served in the British Army as a tank gunner. “I didn’t even have a high school leaving certificate, but I didn’t think of myself as deprived for having to find a job.” All the while, Connor stole moments to compose poetry. “I sensed I had some poetic gift but I didn’t see how I could make much out of it because there was nobody around me who wrote or read poetry, or even read books of any kind. It was just my secret vice.”

Connor did not start attending college until he was thirty-four. By then he had discovered his voice in the “ginnels and alleyways” of his youth. “I believe the dust of the streets should be in poems as well as the dust of the library,” he once said. Like the “squint-eyed” plumber in one of his best-known poems, “Elegy for Alfred Hubbard,” Connor lost himself in his craft. He was taken by surprise when his first book of poetry, *With Love Somehow* (Oxford University Press,

1970), led to academic appointments, first at Amherst College, and then a full professorship at Wesleyan. That validation did not change his practical orientation; over the years he has taught textile and cake design as well as drawing.

Connor had an early history of careful, measured encouragement from other writers to sustain him, but he never experienced the early coddling that gave me a sense of entitlement and expectation before I had published a single word. Connor assured me I was not alone in this regard. “I imagine that since most of the people at Wesleyan come from the middle class, they have received flattery most of their lives. It seems to me that in America, grandchildren’s poems are being pinned on refrigerators and everyone is treated as a little genius or something. That’s a completely different experience from what I had. I grew up around ignorance—people who didn’t give a toss about literature or

books. I just had to find my own kind of encouragement. I certainly wasn’t led to believe that I was an extraordinarily talented person,” he explained. “I always interpreted my job at Wesleyan as helping young people grow up, just by being kind to them and disabusing them of their own sentimental notions of their own work and making them work keenly and closely and with honesty—the opposite of the kind of flattery that you said you experienced. I was just thrilled to discover a talent in myself, make use of it and try to hone it. It is like the Bible says: Virtue is its own reward. Anything that comes after it, like publication or praise, is beside the point. Don’t you think so?”

I found myself confused. If there was no overriding, all-powerful mentor, no early ego stroking, surely there must have been *something* that set him on his path toward being a professional writer, aside from the sheer joy of creation. Connor pinned down three factors that set him on his way: being

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the only person he knew without a father, failing an important exam when he was eleven, and getting one of his teeth smashed out at the same age. In a recent poem, he wrote that the tooth-smashing incident “generated composure / sufficient to withstand / flattery, reprimand, / accusations, praise, / and love’s engulfing gaze.” That playground fall helped him begin again, even as it marked him for life.

The last time we communicated, I thanked him for his time and shared wisdom. “I’m glad you fought your way through to a more reasonable assessment of what it means to be a writer,” he said.

In closing, I told him about my latest project, which actually means something to me. Of course I want this book-in-progress, a memoir, to find its way in the world. I’m glad to report that the project is getting strong responses from my agent and from the writing group that helped me hone my early drafts of *The Cactus Eaters*. But

for now I’m writing it mostly because I can’t pull myself away from it. Connor laughed indulgently when I told him this. “I remember reading that someone thrust his work into Robert Frost’s hands, and said, ‘Mr. Frost, should I go on writing?’ and he said, ‘Well, see if you can stop.’ And, in fact, the world is so full of words that there is every reason not to go on. I can’t think of any reason why I would go on writing poems except I like doing it and I don’t seem to be able to stop it.”

After we hung up, I wondered if Connor, somehow, was the man in the shoebox, or if the shoebox man led me to him. After all, that elementary school diorama did not show someone second-guessing his talents because of his Amazon rankings or some total stranger’s love, hate, or indifference. I’m not suggesting it’s wrong to long, desperately, for publication. All-consuming ego hunger can sustain and motivate us when our courage or our energy flags. But my art project did

not show a writer outsourcing passion and enchantment to implacable forces outside his control; no, my little shoebox man was just some bald guy glued to his chair, typing. Having realized all this before it was too late, I decided to settle into my desk and start typing again. Then it occurred to me that I was leaving out one more essential task—one last bit of business before I could get my bearings back.

This time around, I could not find an actual shoebox so I settled for a FedEx packing container. My fingers are less dexterous than they were in grade school. It was hard to bend a paper clip into a convincing pair of spectacles. Instead of calling the shoebox man an author, I dubbed him *writer*, which sounds vocational and less pompous. Instead of giving him a typewriter, I gave him a pad and pencil. This time around I glued his paper fingers to his desktop, and drove pushpins through his hands for good measure.

Bloody-minded, indeed. ∞

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