ALAN MOORE

STORYTELLING

BBC MAESTRO

> This is what a human face looks like after 40 years of writing. I'd like you to think about that...

COURSE NOTES 2.0

The Lessons

1. Introduction

Hello, I'm Alan Moore.

I'm a writer and warlock from Northampton.

This is not a commercial writing course, because I don't know what that is – I'm not sure anybody does. None of my commercial successes were ever planned as such. They were all remote outsiders that people liked because they were well written, not because they were catching some current trend. I cannot teach you the vagaries of public opinion. I am not, despite my appearance, a Nostradamus. It is best, in my experience, to simply be a good writer. So that is what I will be attempting to instruct you on, irrespective of whether one is a successful author like, say, Jeffrey Archer, or an unpublished loser like William Blake or Emily Dickinson.

As for practical advice for a writing career, here's mine: accept any work you're offered that's legal and morally tolerable, try to do as good a job as you can and learn from the resultant mess. Now, onto the magic. Storytelling, and writing, is not one discipline. It's thirty or forty separate subjects all in one horrifying collision. You will have to learn about character, stories and landscapes, how to present place and period, how to inspire your imagination and then order it into a coherent plot. These and dozens of other things are what I hope to be teaching you in this course.

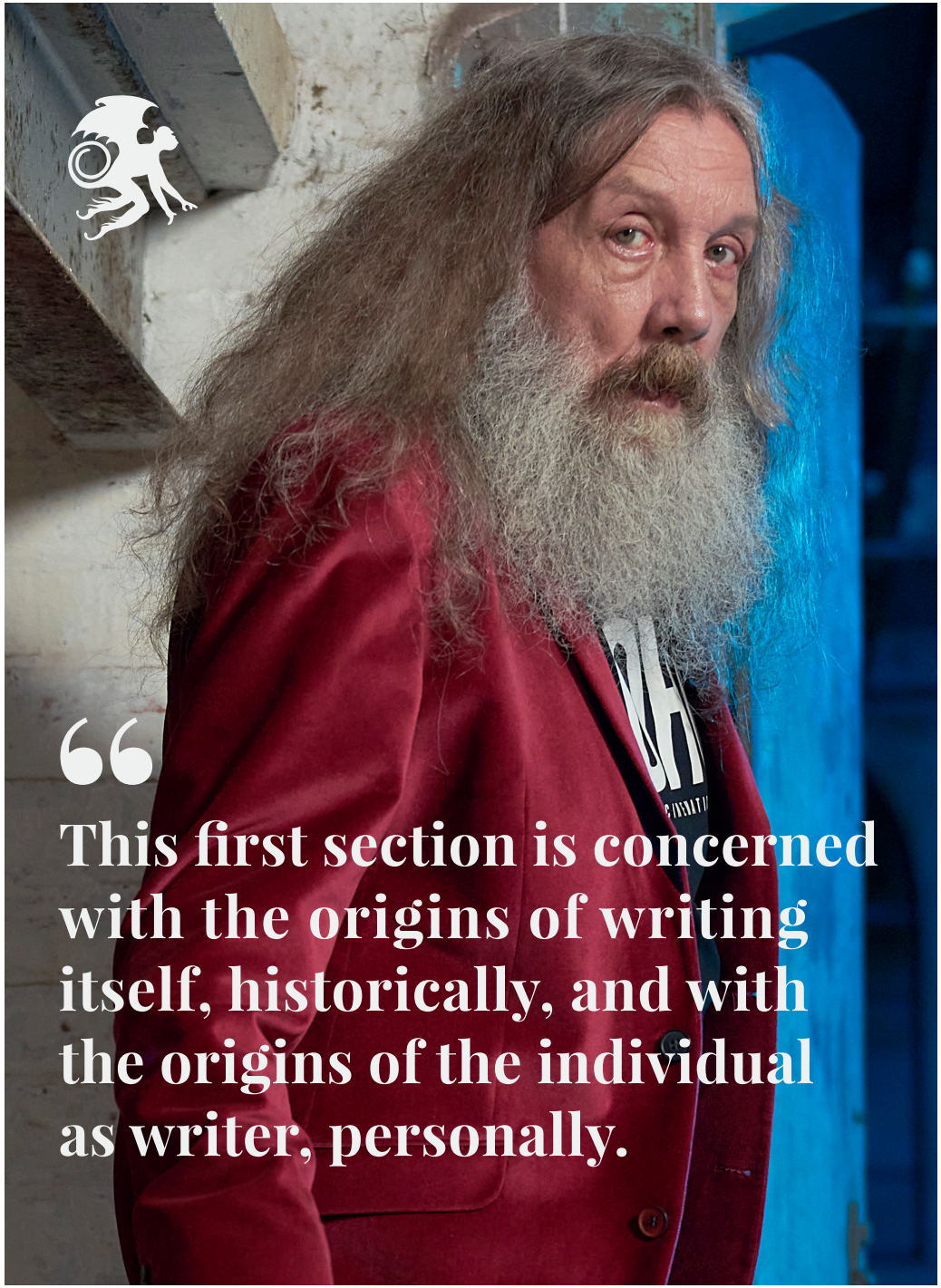
This will equip you for a career as a writer. You'll depart from the course with a lot more knowledge about being a writer and the degree of thinking it entails, how to navigate your way successfully around the various bedevilments any writer is going to face.

I will share with you the importance of progressing as a writer, of continually moving on and trying new things in order to stop yourself becoming stale and stagnant.

I hope that I will be able to show you all of the various aspects of the writer's art so that you can do them as second nature.

And if that doesn't make you the most perfect writer in the world, it will at least hopefully make you as good a writer as I am.

Alan Moore



Part One : Origins ~
2. Writing As Enchantment

WRITING & MAGIC

Writing has been, and always will be, our foremost means of modifying human consciousness. You are modifying the consciousness of the reader and therefore you are modifying the reality of the reader. Writing will modify the reality and the consciousness of the entire species and, inevitably, will mean modifying the consciousness of the writer themselves.

Before writing we had awareness, empathy, grunts and gestures, but before we could write down the language, we could not retain any information or develop our human consciousness. And thus, the people who had discovered the wonderful ability of writing would have had supernatural powers in the eyes of the people surrounding them. They would have been able to send their thoughts, at a distance, to somebody else. They would be able to capture moments, and record events, which would lead to the understanding of cause and effect. These things would lead to science and art and almost every field of human endeavour. All arising from this stone-age magic.

When we look at the development of writing and magic, we begin to see that they're largely the same thing. Painting, writing – all of these effects were regarded as supernatural powers in the ancient world. They could change human consciousness and they could change the world that we lived in. Essentially, today we are living amongst those parts of our imagination that we've been able to bail out from inside our heads.

THE BARDIC TRADITION

The bardic tradition of magic was one that was entirely based upon writing and literature. Interestingly, bards were much more feared than your common or garden witch or sorcerer. If a magician puts a curse upon you, then your hens are probably going to lay a bit funny. Your child might be born with a squint. These things are not that terrible. But if a bard puts a satire upon you, then that will destroy you in the eyes of your friends, your family and potentially your own eyes. And if it's a good enough satire, if it is finely worded enough, then even two or three hundred years after you're dead, people might still be laughing at you and your absurdity.

The early gods of writing, the scribe gods like Odin, Thoth or Hermes, were also the gods of magic. I don't believe that that is entirely a coincidence. In my estimation, writing and magic are practically the same thing.

Stand tall with your pen. You should never think of yourself as purely an entertainer for hire who is lucky to have the work. You should remember that a writer can changethe world. Think of the books that have completely changed human history. See yourself in that light. Because if you are a writer, then you are having an effect upon human history. And the entirety of the human future.

Part One : Origins ~
3. Becoming A Writer

EVERYBODY CAN WRITE

Don't let the enchantment and mystical history put you off. Everybody can write. Perhaps, everybody should write. It is not some divine calling that only settles upon a few special individuals.

The foremost and most important instrument in a writer's toolkit is the writer herself. To develop as a writer will almost certainly entail developing as a person. It will be necessary to acquire a properly thought-through moral standpoint, and perhaps an equally well-reasoned political position from which to observe and weigh the world that is being written about.

I am not saying that those should be left-wing, right-wing or (my own personal preference) an anarchist opinion. The important thing is to have a moral or political platform from which to look at the world and hopefully understand it. One whereby you can employ compassion and empathy to look at someone who has ideas that are completely foreign to your own and yet perhaps understand why they have them. Understand that you yourself, brought up in slightly different circumstances, may have had exactly those ideas. And be flexible because the ground will inevitably change underneath you, politically and morally.

WAYS OF SEEING

Equally vital is the development of a considered aesthetic viewpoint, the criteria with which a writer can evaluate the work of others and, crucially, their own writings. Genuine passion will also be required, both for writing itself and for whatever is the writing's subject. The development and husbandry of a unique worldview, which may take a career, can vastly extend a writer's range and capabilities, and can also satisfyingly extend them as a human being.

Essentially, one should cultivate the **ways of seeing** that are a necessity for any creative individual.

Your experience and your perceptions can turn into an energy that will fuel the rest of your writing career. But the first thing is to develop that self – the writer as a person, you, yourself.

Once you've developed that, everything else will fall into place.

Part One : Origins ~
4. Four Weapons

From time to time during this course, I'll use magical terminology to make a point about writing. This doesn't mean that I'm trying to introduce you to some strange cult or that you'll have to sacrifice any goats or worship any ugly looking idols. I am simply sharing advice given to magicians which I think would also be useful advice for somebody aspiring to be a writer.

The first of these concepts is the four weapons – four symbolic tools or weapons that any magician is advised to ensure they possess a full complement of before commencing their magical career. These are the four suits of the Tarot deck: coins (or discs, pentacles), swords, cups and wands. Each of these one of the four classical elements, and a human quality or ability, that is necessary if you wish to be a magician or a writer.

I advise you not to neglect any single one of them.

COINS represent the element of earth, or your ability to deal with the material world. For a writer that means pay attention to your physical circumstances. You don't want to starve in a garret. Also, try and obtain a knowledge of the physical world – how situations work, how people work – and how they all fit together. Educate yourself about history and science, hospitals and flight. Try and find out how every facet of the material world works and you'll be a better writer because of it.

THE SWORD represents the element of air, or the human quality of intellect. It is the intellect that has a sharp cutting edge that enables you to discriminate between a good idea and a bad idea. To expand your intellect will be to expand your capacity to write about things. These things will be very useful to you in your career as a writer.

THE CUP represents the element of water, or human emotion and compassion. Feel compassion for your most villainous character. If you're going to write about them, or put words in their mouth, you need to understand them as a human being. The key to that is compassion – to be able to think yourself into somebody else's shoes.

THE WAND represents the element of fire, or the human spirit or will. This is the most important of the four weapons because it is the weapon that should be directing the other three. Will is the single most important element because, without it, you will not finish the shortest of stories. You can very easily end up with nothing but a stack of unfinished manuscripts. The important thing about will is that if you focus on your imagination, you can bring things into materialisation where they exist in the real world, where the rest of us exist and can read them.

HOW I DISCOVERED MY WAND

It's easier said than done, finding your will. How is it done? I can only share my experience…

When normal avenues of education were forbidden to me at the age of about seventeen, I began to realise that I was at something of a disadvantage. But if I was ever to have the career that I'd dreamed of, as a writer and a creative individual who could support themselves, then I was going to have to attempt it at some point.

In my mid-twenties I decided to leave work and live off the then non-existent mercies of the benefit system until I could establish myself as a writer. I sat around and did very little for the best part of a year. I was planning huge projects that I was never

going to be able to finish. It came to the point where I saw myself starting these incredible epic sagas but only managing one page of pencil mess in six months.

I was never going to complete these things, so I would never have to send them in and have them judged by somebody. I would never have to have them rejected. Because if they got rejected, then I wouldn't even have the dream of being a writer. I wouldn't be able to say that I would have been a writer if it wasn't for my working-class upbringing, or experience at school, or the circumstances of my life – there'd be some excuse.

What I realised was that I was trying to avoid being judged. And it was foredooming any attempt at being a writer. If you don't finish your work and give it to somebody to appraise, then it will never get published. It's entirely down to you. To be a writer, you must take responsibility for yourself and for your own actions.

As soon as I realised that, I took action. I sent some comic strip samples in and received a telegram reply saying they'd like to start running the strip. This was my first professional work and enabled me to build the rest of my career upon it.

Purely by taking my life into my own hands, I discovered not just the secret of being a good writer, but the secret of being a responsible human being.

Part One : Origins ~
5. Learning To Read

Natural differences in ability notwithstanding, it is probably fair to say that a person will be precisely as good a writer as they are a reader.

As a child, a story will seize your imagination and transport you to a different place. You get the habit of reading and do it under the bedclothes by torchlight. Sooner or later, you will consider writing a story yourself. In fact, you could very easily say that reading is the gateway drug for writing.

HOW TO READ

Becoming a writer will change your reading experience in a number of ways. You will never again be able to completely immerse yourself in a story or a piece of text in the way you once did. Part of your mind will be continually analysing the text to try and find out how the writer achieved their effects. While that can be a little bit distancing, there are compensations. Once you understand how the writer is achieving their effects through thinking and ingenuity, it will perhaps be a much richer experience for you.

Read with an analytical eye. If you're suddenly frightened, touched, or amused while reading, look back over the preceding pages or paragraphs and see how the writer has achieved that. This is one of the joys of being a writer that reads. Your own responses can teach you a lot about universal human responses. Then you can back-engineer them to find out how the writer got that response.

WHAT TO READ

I would suggest that you be as omnivorous as possible. Read everything. Don't differentiate between the highest pinnacles of literature and the lowest slums of pulp and genre. Read philosophical treaties. Read Viz. Everything is potentially powerful and will enrich you as a writer.

Read terrible books because they can be more inspiring than good books. If you're inspired by a good book, there is always the danger of plagiarism, of writing something too close to it. Whereas a genuinely helpful reaction to a piece of work that you're reading is, "Jesus Christ, I could write this shit". It's immensely liberating. Analyse what they're doing badly and you'll discover all the mistakes not to make.

EXERCISE

Go to your local bookshop or library and pick out a book at random. Something from the bargain bin is ideal. Analyse it, good or bad, using the techniques and approaches discussed in this lesson.

Part One : Origins ~
6. Imagination ~ Fire Of The Gods

The nature of the fire stolen from the gods by Prometheus can be deduced from a study of his name, which translates as 'before-thought', the consideration of events yet to occur, hence imagination.

Imagination is one of the most valuable precious metals that a writer can mine. It is essential. Whatever you're writing about – fiction, historical events, football – you're going to need an imagination to think yourself into that world.

ADJUST THE PARAMETERS

In *Metamagical Themas*, Douglas R Hofstadter shares a story of a friend of his who had suggested a possible way of looking at the imagination. This friend, in a crowded restaurant one Friday night, had said, "Boy, I'd hate to be a waitress in here tonight". If you imagine that any situation has parameter dials, you could adjust the details of the situation. In this case, the friend had adjusted two dials: the gender dial, so that he was now a female, and his social role, so that instead of being a customer, he was now somebody employed by the restaurant. Hofstadter considered this a creative act – he has altered the parameters of reality and made a new story.

This is how a lot of art and writing gets created. For example, if we take Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, and we adjust the parameters of time and place, then we've got West Side Story. Adjust them in a different way and you'll have a different story.

PROMPTS

In *Downriver*, Iain Sinclair put together a sequence from a bunch of nineteenth-century postcards he'd bought from a junk shop. Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies* is a box of cards, each of which has an instruction written upon it, sometimes simple, sometimes unfathomable or ambiguous. The idea is to derail our thinking when we're stuck in a creative rut, to find a new way of looking at things. It has worked enough in my experience to make this a very useful tool.

The imagination is endless. There is potentially more in the human imagination than there is in the whole physical universe because the imagination contains the whole physical universe and a lot of things from universes that we have never seen and will never see.

HARNESS YOUR WAND

Remember to use your will alongside your imagination. Without having the will applied to it, imagination is a treacherous sucking bog that you can waste your entire life in. Losing yourself in daydreams is dangerous – thinking about how great it's going to be when you've written your novel, won the lottery and found love – it's like quicksand and can neutralise your entire life if you let it.

Train your will upon your imagination and you will be able to bring your idle dreams and fancies down into a material form.

Imagination is the most priceless gold that you could ever possibly mine but don't get caught in a cave-in at the pit.

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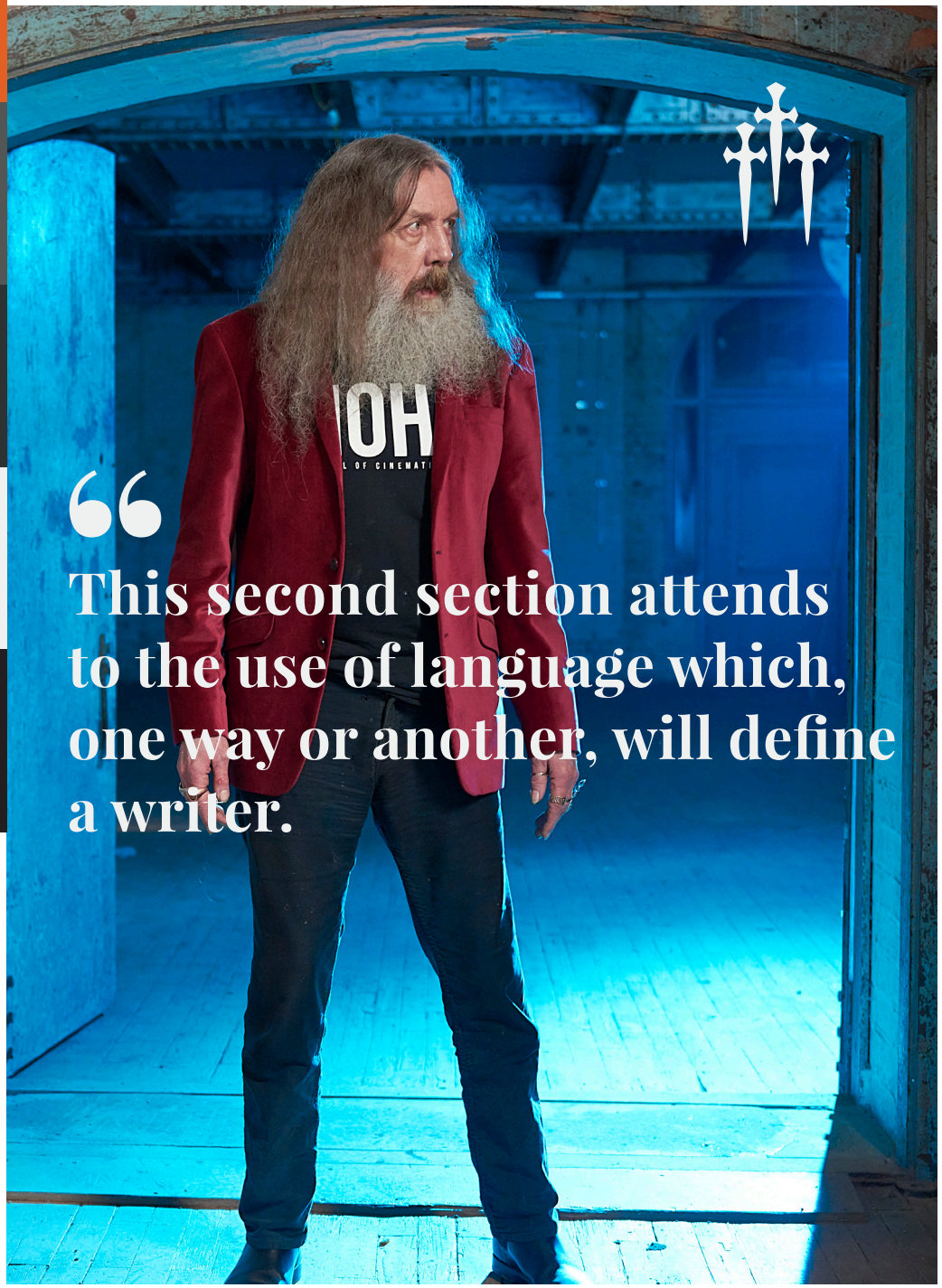
EXERCISE

Adjust the parameters on your favourite story and see if you can create something novel and progressive. Does changing the character, setting or time period by one notch spark something different? Try different combinations and see what possibilities you can come up with.



Part Two : Language ~
7. Language As Technology

WE CAN DESCRIBE ANYTHING

The word technology means ‘writings about technique’. From the Greek ‘techne’ meaning art, skill, craft or technique and ‘logos’ meaning word or the utterance by which inward thought is expressed. Language is clearly our first and most spectacularly effective technology, upon which all the others are founded. Alfred Korzybski, the Einstein of semantics, concludes that the entirety of our conscious awareness, and thus the whole of our subjective reality, is comprised from nothing but language. Thus, with only a couple of dozen abstract glyphs and a peppering of punctuation, we can describe anything conceivable within human experience.

With the right language, we can create a virtual reality for the reader that is more immersive and more meaningful than anything remotely in the reach of other technologies: consider a visceral VR recreation of the Crimean War versus the experience of reading War and Peace. The latter would give you a meaningful account of what happened because there is a lot more to experience than simple sensation.

THE POWER OF WORDS

We must be careful. With that scattering of punctuation and those letters, we can create trivial short stories and entertainment, or we can create things of dangerous power that are so explosive that they could change the world – books like the Bible, the Qur’an, Das Kapital and Mein Kampf. Remember the power you have as a writer, use it wisely and, whatever you do, don’t write Mein Kampf.

It is important to have a wide vocabulary if you are going to achieve these effects upon altering human consciousness. I would recommend getting an etymological dictionary which will tell you where all the words come from and precisely what they mean.

LOVE THE LANGUAGE

More than that, you're going to need a love of language, of new and unusual words. There wasn't a lot of that around in the working-class neighbourhoods that I grew up in. Nevertheless, my mother particularly enjoyed unusual words, as if they belonged to better-off people but that she had somehow got hold of them.

She would take such glee in saying, 'Oh, our Alan, why do you have to be so obstreperous?' I think it was contagious because I began to gather unusual words and there are some fantastic ones out there: craquelure, which is the web of fissures in the varnish on a painting; or xanthic, which is a much nicer way of saying yellow; and quaquaversal, which means spreading out evenly in all directions.

I used the last to describe a massive pile of pornography as a 'quaquaversal strumpet cascade'. You might only ever use these words once, if that, but it's great to know them.

Part Two : Language ~
8. The Neurology Of Writing

HOW WRITING AFFECTS THE BRAIN

Reading is a neurological phenomenon. Words on the page trigger neural responses and we experience witnessed or described scenes in our nervous systems. In *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*, Samuel R. Delaney's work on the language of science fiction, he discusses the efficacy of this opening line: "The red sun is high, the blue, low."

Seven words in the right order and we are immediately transported to an entirely alien landscape that has two suns, one red, one blue, they are both casting shadows in different directions, probably violet where they intersect.

Why do words affect us in this way? I think it might have something to do with a recently discovered phenomenon called mirror neurons. If we are watching somebody rowing a boat, for example, the same area of our brain lights up as if we were rowing the boat ourselves. It's like we get a ghostly echo in our neurology of the things that we are looking at. I suspect that this is the same whether we're observing things in real life, watching a film or reading a book.

WORDPLAY SPARKS SYNAPSES

With modern brain imaging techniques, we can see how the brain reacts to wordplay. When Shakespeare turns the noun 'lip' into a verb meaning to kiss, or the adjective 'bawdy' into the noun 'bawd' meaning perhaps a sex worker, our neurology becomes really excited because something unusual is being done with language – and practically our entire consciousness is made of language.

Shakespeare often uses this clever wordplay before a dramatic denouement, so our brains are all wound up waiting for something exciting to happen and then he gives us his dramatic resolutions. This is the power of language over our minds.

WEIRD WONDERS

Unusual language alters the reader's consciousness. Where James Joyce uses intricate techniques with the words themselves, so we don't fully understand, our minds go into a different, much more receptive state. Believers in magic will use 'barbarous tongues' (a language that you do not personally understand) for spells, to induce a receptive trance-state.

It affects the writer too. I once spent so long inventing new and unusual language for a chapter in my novel *Jerusalem*, written in the language of James Joyce, that after the couple of months it took me to write it, I couldn't even think in proper English anymore. My mind had become so conditioned to making up new words that I was unable to have a basic conversation. I had to take 18 months off.

In George Orwell's *1984*, he introduced 'Newspeak', which is a new form of English engineered by the totalitarian state designed to limit consciousness by limiting vocabulary. I fear that this may be true, that the less language you have, the more limited you are in what you can think. But must not the converse also be true? Must not an expanded use of language and vocabulary raise the consciousness, both of the author and of the reader? It is certainly something to think about.

EXERCISE

Have a really big, satisfying think.

Part Two : Language ~
9. Hemingway vs. Baudelaire ~ Who Would Win?

Well, obviously Hemingway, because he'd have the gun, but our broader point here is a consideration of the **Attic** and the **Asiatic** styles of writing.

ATTIC WRITERS (like Hemingway) use simple, blunt sentences and plain English.

ASIATIC WRITERS (like Baudelaire*) decorate language like a bombast's wedding cake and use every linguistic trick at their disposal. (* And me)

Attic writing is popular and has its place in instruction manuals, while Asiatic writing gives you the opportunity to influence and affect the reader through the perfumed spell you are casting with your language.

Théophile Gaultier said that decadent writing (a form of Asiatic writing) should be unafraid of borrowing from the most ancient mythologies and the most modern technical vocabularies. I agree. You have the whole of literature at your disposal. Combine the Epic of Gilgamesh from ancient Mesopotamia and the latest issue of *New Scientist* for a luscious broth.

Part Two : Language ~
10. Fascinating Rhythm

RHETORIC

The ancient Greeks discovered the magical effects of some of these wordy spell techniques and called it the art of rhetoric. These were things that could improve the persuasiveness of your speech or writing and make it sound more sonorous to the persons listening to it. *Elements of Eloquence,* by Mark Forsyth, taught me a great deal about rhetoric including hypotaxis, parataxis and hyperbaton

There's also synesthesia, when one sense comes across as another. There's a wonderful example from Raymond Chandler, who punctuated his blunt and paratactic crime writing with this element of sheet poetry:

"She smelled the way the Taj Mahal looks by moonlight."

EXERCISE

Try writing the same paragraph in both the Attic and the Asiatic styles. Are there parts you like of either, or both? Now try combining them to get the best of both worlds.

When I was a teenager, I did what many teenagers do and wrote dreadful poetry that pretended to be about the H bomb or social injustice, when it was really about not being able to find a girlfriend and what I considered the injustices of my own life. I typed them up for little fanzines me and my friends were publishing in those days and was happy with these early poems and how they looked on the printed page.

This sense of smug self-satisfaction lasted exactly until my first poetry reading, where lines that had looked fantastic to me on the page suddenly became impossible to navigate. I learned that the most important element is rhythm, both for reading aloud and for the reader to conjure in their own head.

DEVELOP YOUR 'LITERARY EAR'

Rhythm is a key implement in creating the mesmeric trance in which the reader should be suspended. It's hypnotic. You can carry a lot of material on just the rhythm of the thing. There is a multiplicity of rhythmic devices that you can employ in your prose. Know what you're using and know its effect, and your writing will be immeasurably enriched.

LET'S MEET THE PERIODIC ELEMENTS OF RHYTHM...

AN IAMB

Pronounced 'I am' (an iamb in itself), this is a metrical foot where the stress is on the second beat.

'I am'

A TROCHEE

The opposite of an iamb, this is a two-beat metrical foot with the stress on the first syllable.

‘garden’

Most of Shakespeare is in **iambic pentameter**, which is five iambs to each line:

“But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?”

Iambic pentameter is very similar to the rhythm of natural speech, mellifluous and pleasing to the ear, whereas trochees sound like a tribal beat with that unstressed ending. That is very effective for incantations, but otherwise it will inevitably end up sounding like Hiawatha, and nobody wants that.

NOW, LET’S PLAY...

ALLITERATION

Words that begin with the same sound (not necessarily letters) placed close together. For example: *the **j**aniform **g**ent lay **j**acent in the **g**ym.*

ANAPHORA

When a certain word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of clauses or sentences that follow each other. For example, in William Blake’s poem *London*:

In every cry of **every** Man,
In every infant’s cry of fear,
In every voice in **every** ban,
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear

ASSONANCE

The repetition of the same or similar vowel sounds within words, phrases or sentences. For example: *There’s n**o** place like h**o**me; The **ea**rly b**i**rd catches the **worm**; A stitch in t**i**me saves n**i**ne.*

And that’s just the ‘a’s. There are dozens of literary techniques you can employ to enchant the reader with rhythm and rhyme. Take the time to look them up and try them on. Stephen Fry’s guide to writing poetry, *The Ode Less Travelled*, kindly introduces these techniques.

READ YOUR WORK ALOUD

I cannot stress enough how important it is to read your work aloud to yourself. Embody the writers of the Beat movement (like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsburg), who attempted to capture the spontaneous free-flowing energy of jazz and bebop.

See where you’ve dropped a syllable in the rhythm or when you’re left on an off-kilter stress. Any break in rhythm is a break in the mesmeric trance that you’re trying to cast over the reader. It will draw them out of the story, while a continuous beat will keep them enthralled right to the end of the piece.

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EXERCISE

Analyse the meter of my poem, *Old Gangsters Never Die*. Mark the stresses as shown above and see what other literary techniques you can identify.

OLD GANGSTERS NEVER DIE

Old gangsters never die,
Except the few that pass away in cinemas at midnight,
Lay there sprawling in the footlights
For the usherette or ice-cream girl to find.
And if I die – God knows, I might – don't let me die in black and white.
Don't make me share a haunted screen
With every other ghostboy who stood
Trembling in the foyer sipping wine,
Then coughed, and shot their cuffs, and checked the time,
And stepped outside to get cut down by dead policemen,
Faces strobing in the panic light,
Their long, dark cars parked out the back,
Their halos black against the night
And John Dillinger's name in finest bullet-silver etched upon their skin,
A cold tattoo above the heart
Right next to where the badge is pinned.
I could die carefully, at dusk.
Old gangsters never die.

'Cause buddy, I once owned a pair of diamond collar-studs,
And as I live and breathe I swear that that's no lie
And guys like me deserve to cash their chips more elegant
Than those without a shirt upon their back or shine upon their dancing shoes.
Like playing poker – being dealt the Ace of Flames
You stand, and, whispering once your mother's name,
Pitch headlong dead across the roulette table,
Bullet-holes pinned like armistice poppies
In neat rows across your back.

Or drowning. Do you know, so many hoods and hitmen got sent down
To tread the river-bed for all eternity
And I would gladly kiss the hand of any man who'd bind my wrists
And send me down
To be in such good company:
Dutch Schultz. Capone.
Why, men like that had hellstars in their eyes
And when they walked in groups of more than three
They must have looked like grounded constellations, torn down
From a B-film sky.
Old gangsters never die.

Say, wouldn't it be nice to fall asleep forever
In some old speakeasy in the 1920s where they never
Pulled aside the blind and looked outside to find
That fifty years
Had washed away
All of the legends
And the zoot-suits
And the bloodstains,
Like a fistful of dead roses someone left there with the hat-check girl
Then drove off into old Chicago
With their windows wound and radios turned down
To keep their holstered shoulders cold and dry.
Old gangsters never die.

Hey, John! I got the tickets for the show, here in my very hand.
Enjoy the show,
And when you kiss that girl goodnight there in her red dress streaming
Do it carefully.
Good burgundy upon the tongue, for she will kill you, John,
And one must always kiss one's killer,
Now ain't that so?
Hey, Ma! They shot your boys out there
And as I live and breathe, I never seen a pair who fell so sweet
To hear the final poetry of cordite in the air
Or turned their faces up, like so,
Receiving death as if it were a mother's kiss or something black
And rare.
Hey, fellas! Is it cold there in that movie-house tonight?
Come on, let's pass round that Jack Daniels
And we'll talk about old murders,
Double-crosses
And dead blondes, and we'll say "Here's looking at ya."
"Here's blood in your eye."
Old ghosts sit in the backroom.
Old dreams wear dusty clothing.
Old bodies don't tell stories.
Old gangsters never die.

Part Two : Language ~
11. Inventive Language

If you want your reader to make it through the entire length of your story without their interest waning, you'd be well advised to use some inventive language.

AVOID CLICHÉS

Try to avoid using phrases that every other writer has used. There are ways of constantly making your language more adventurous.

THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

Grab their attention with a surprising image or a startling use of words.

JUXTAPOSITION

A great way to do this is by putting together words that seem to be discordant but together sometimes effect a beautiful disfigurement – as in the phrase 'beautiful disfigurement'.

MASTERS OF INVENTIVE LANGUAGE:

STEVE AYLETT

Steve's prose is genuinely hilarious, completely hallucinatory. He uses words, phrases and concepts in a way that I have never seen before. It makes whatever he is writing about guaranteed to be an enthralling piece of text.

"The optimist sees the future as a rabbit sees the oncoming truck - getting bigger, not closer."

"How many times does a man have to shave before his chin gets the message?"

"What's life in this nation? Collect emptiness in a household of cornflakes. Transient fuel gobbles attention, the television aches, the truth walks. Scheme worms welcome your corpse, trap clicks and you're in heaven, bored rigid."

"Nothing like a spider in the mouth to get you thinking."

H.P. LOVECRAFT

Lovecraft has a reputation as an old-fashioned writer who hated modernism in any form, but I think that he was probably a closet modernist. He is often criticised for his overblown use of adjectives but he was using language in a very determined way. He would overload his creatures with descriptive adjectives, so much so that it would make it impossible for the reader to put together a clear mental picture.

"It seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive. If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing."

"The Thing cannot be described – there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order. A mountain walked or stumbled."

"The back was piebald with yellow and black, and dimly suggested the squamous covering of certain snakes. Below the waist, though, it was the worst; for here all human resemblance left off and sheer phantasy began. The skin was thickly covered with coarse black fur, and from the abdomen a score of long greenish-grey tentacles with red sucking mouths protruded limply."

OULIPO

The **Oulipo** movement is a group of largely French-speaking writers who seek to create works of literature using constrained writing techniques. These restrictions force language and writing into interesting new strategies and forms such as Georges Perec's novel *La disparition*, written without the letter 'e', the ingenious *Eunoia* by Christian Bök, with one individual vowel used per chapter, and even Oulipo police procedurals, or 'OuliPopo'.

"Hassan can, at a handclap, call a vassal at hand and ask that all staff plan a bacchanal – a gala ball that has what pagan charm small galas lack."

From Chapter A, Eunoia

"Writing is inhibiting. Sighing, I sit, scribbling in ink this pidgin script. I sing with nihilistic witticism, disciplining signs with trifling gimmicks – impish hijinks which highlight stick sigils. Isn't it glib? Isn't it chic? I fit childish insights within rigid limits, writing shtick which might instill priggish misgivings in critics blind with hindsight. I dismiss nit-picking criticism which flirts with philistinism. I bitch; I kibitz – griping whilst criticizing dimwits, sniping whilst indicting nitwits, dismissing simplistic thinking, in which philippic wit is still illicit."

From Chapter I, Eunoia

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EXERCISE

Try writing a paragraph or poem using only one vowel.

Part Three : Story ~
12. Structure

Structure means the shape and composition of the story – it can be as elaborate or simple as you want.

The first thing to determine structure is size.

THE SHORT STORY

In a short story, all of the elements of a long-form work are encountered in miniature and can be subsequently scaled up, making it a near-perfect starting point for any writer. And because they are relatively swiftly accomplished, you will be able to experiment more.

THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

Beginning, middle and end… It's simple but an excellent way of structuring your story. Screenwriter **Syd Field** recommends jotting down notes on each scene on record cards and sorting them into three piles. He calls these three sections *set up, confrontation* and *resolution*. By the end of your setup, you should have established all of your characters and your essential situation, so that the reader thinks that they know where the rest of the book is going. In the confrontation, you should have something that completely reverses the reader's expectations and finish on a big revelation that will propel the story towards a new and unexpected climax.

NON-LINEAR NARRATIVE

Once you've got your structure, you can play about with it. You don't have to have your beginning, middle and end in that order. There are interesting effects that can be had by starting with the end, and then filling in how we got to that point in flashback. You can chop your story into any order as long as it holds the reader's interest and successfully tells your story.

FORMAT

Consider the variety of structural formats. You could employ an epistolary narrative, like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which is largely conducted through letters and diary extracts. This adds an air of authority and allows you to tell the story from numerous points of view. You might try stories structured like an intrusive questionnaire, or an annotated poem, or a cache of documents, or an unadorned dialogue – you can borrow structures from almost anywhere. You are simply crafting the shape of the story to leave an impression in the mind of the reader.

BEYOND THE PLOT

Always remember that the plot is not the story. It's just what gets you from one end of the story to the other. For example, the plot of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* – some animals take over a farm – is not what the book is about.

Part Three : Story ~
13. Genre

ACTION & ADVENTURE ~ COMEDY ~ FANTASY ~ HORROR ~

MYSTERY ~ DRAMA ~ SCIENCE FICTION ~ THRILLER ~

HISTORICAL ~ ROMANCE ~ WESTERN ~ LITERARY FICTION ~

BILDUNGSROMAN (COMING OF AGE) ~ SPECULATIVE FICTION ~

DYSTOPIAN ~ MAGICAL REALISM ~

As with most important things in the world, genre comes from Northampton. Genre grew out of the gothic movement, which grew out of the graveyard poetry movement, which in turn grew out of the writings of the miserable but very eloquent Northampton divine, James Hervey. He wrote beautifully about how only God was eternal and that all of the flesh would eventually decay and fall away. This inspired the first graveyard poets, like Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, and some were taken by the bats and skulls but not so much the God business, so you got the later graveyard poets which in turn inspired writers like Horace Walpole who loves all of this miserable ghoulishness and writes a novel based in its style – and so the gothic novel is invented. Up until this point, literature had been the comedy of manners like Sheridan or Jane Austen, anything sensational and ghastly wasn't considered to be proper writing.

TROPES

Always start off with a genre that you know and enjoy. Something you're genuinely excited about and know the tropes for, because if you're well informed about that genre, you can deliberately bend or break it. There's no better moment in genre than when the artificial tropes are highlighted for satirical or dramatic effect.

MIX IT UP

As you evolve as a writer, you'll discover that real life is a collision of genres. We are not separated into tragedies and comedies and romances and science-fiction dramas. They're all happening at once, every day of our lives. Perhaps the best way to approach this is to try and write in numerous different genres at once. Cormac McCarthy does this in *Blood Meridian*. He is positioned in the Western genre but smashes it with violent horror and luminous poetry.

Genre is a set of restrictions around different areas of literature, but breaking those walls down can give you an incredible release of energy that can fuel your stories.

Part Three : Story ~
14. Mode

"Now driving in a wild frieze of headlong horses with eyes walled and teeth cropped and naked riders with clusters of arrows clenched in their jaws and their shields winking in the dust and up the far side of the ruined ranks in a piping of boneflutes and dropping down off the sides of their mounts with one heel hung in the withers strap and their short bows flexing beneath the outstretched necks of the ponies until they had circled the company and cut their ranks in two and then rising up again like funhouse figures, some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandylegged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows… Dust stanched the wet and naked heads of the scalped who with the fringe of hair below their wounds and tonsured to the bone now lay like maimed and naked monks in the bloodslaked dust and everywhere the dying groaned and gibbered and horses lay screaming."

Excerpt from *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy

MODE

Almost as important as its genre in shaping a story, is its mode. On one level, this is the decision to tell a given story in a comedic mode, a dramatic mode, or some commingling of both. Both comedy and horror are working on the principle of subverting the reader's expectations. They slide very easily between one another. I did a story about a haunted house that had two of the ghosts of deceased gunfighters chasing each other around a table in the séance room, shooting bits off of each other, so that eventually there's just a pair of legs chasing the remains of the other gunfighter, while a head that has landed in the fireplace directs the remaining parts of its body. Now, that's horrific but also kind of funny. With just a slight shift of atmosphere, you can affect the mode of your story.

TENSE

It is possible to write a story in the future tense but I wouldn't advise it. Your best choices are past and present. Past tense is most generally used and is perhaps the easiest to write. It is very comfortable upon the ear, it is non-threatening and there is a sense of distance. With present tense narrative it is completely different – there is much more immediacy and engagement. It is somehow more electric to have these things happening in the present.

PERSON

A lot of writers will probably go for the **third person** – he, she, it. It is very useful because the third person is omniscient, it is an author's voice that already knows everything about the story. A third person narrator is not restricted to what a single character knows or experiences, they can jump from place to place and throughout time without the character's knowledge. However, the **first person** is powerfully immediate and puts you right inside the character. While it is perhaps more difficult, it does allow for clever literary tricks – like the unreliable narrator that allows for further misdirection and character revelation.

A third alternative is the **close third person**, where you're talking in the third person – he walks down the street, she goes to the laundry, and so on – but you're so close to the person that you can hear their thoughts. An example from my novel *Jerusalem* is the second chapter where the main character is a crack-addicted sex worker called Marla. It's a third-person narrative, but we can see how her thoughts run around a rat maze, from need to fear to anger back to need again. We can be so close to her that we can hear her made-up internal arguments where she's shouting in block capital letters at her mother who isn't in the room with her and who she hasn't seen for three years. We can be right at the centre of this person's experience, and we can pull back and look at them from outside. It allows for free indirect discourse, a term that has arisen from neurology, which gives the reader the opportunity to dip in and out of different characters' consciousness. This increases the readers' empathy, enabling them to see even inside a flawed or villainous character and to see why they did the things that they did.

EXERCISE

Try rewriting some of your work in close third person, using free indirect discourse to hop between the minds and thoughts of different characters.

Part Three : Story ~
15. Time & Timing

Books involve at least two different kinds of time. There is narrative time, as it passes for the work's characters, where there can be a gap of years in the turning of the page, and there is time as it passes, hopefully not too sluggishly, for the reader. An interesting use of the first kind can make the second kind a more pleasant experience.

TIME FRAME

There's no reason why you have to start your story at the beginning and move mechanically to the end. You can start at the end and then fill in the background with flashbacks. You can start wherever you want. Stories like *Rashomon* and *The Conversation* repeat certain scenes or incidents from different perspectives, giving more information with each retelling.

PACE

You can give a story pace by judicious edits, and an observation of the cuts in films can assist with this. I recently wrote a scene for a television programme, featuring a character who carried out horrific acts of brutality with fruit, that involved cutting between her staring at an aggressive bouncer and a nearby watermelon – looks at the bouncer, looks at the fruit, cut to ambulance arriving. The audience gets what happened and it's funnier to cut straight to the aftermath. Let the readers fill in the gap.

TIME TRAVEL

If you're writing a science fiction or fantasy narrative, you can do extraordinary things with time. The film *Arrival*, adapted from Ted Chiang's *The Story of Your Life*, shows the arrival of aliens on Earth who attempt to communicate with humans. Eventually, the main character, who is a human linguist, begins to understand the aliens and that they see time as a solid, in which past, present and future are happening all at once. This leads to a very poignant conclusion where we realise that things that we had thought were flashbacks by the central character were, in fact, very sad premonitions. It's a wonderful, heart-stopping, heartwarming film.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* is another inspiring example. An American serviceman called Billy Pilgrim is a prisoner of war in Dresden at the exact moment when the Allies commence their comprehensive firebombing. Perhaps disturbed by this experience, he believes himself to have been abducted by a race of aliens called the Tralfamadorians and placed in a zoo with a Playboy centrefold called Montana Wildhack. These aliens also see time as a solid, that everything is happening at once and that people in the past are still alive in the past. This becomes Billy's philosophy, so he ends up an old man simultaneously dying in bed and mating with Montana Wildhack in an alien zoo.

These are just two ways you can play with time if you have the liberty that science fiction and fantasy permit you.

TIMING

A good way to learn the sense of timing is by studying comedians. Timing is crucial in telling a joke or delivering a routine. Look at some of the old silent screen comedians like Buster Keaton and examine how he times a joke. Eventually, you will start to get a sense of how you can bring this element of timing to your stories and make them a beautiful ride for the reader, or an excursion at breakneck pace if you feel like it.

EXERCISE

Watch Buster Keaton's film, *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, and analyse the silent star's comedic timing. Consider the thought and effort that went into each comical moment and how you can bring this to your own writing.

Part Three : Story ~
16. Misdirection

The most important tool a writer has is absolute honesty – no, only kidding. It's misdirection. Misdirection is wonderful. You can completely deceive and betray your readership and they will thank you for it.

WITHOLDING INFORMATION

This is a very common form of misdirection that everybody uses, allowing your readership a drip-feed of information so that they only get information when you want them to have it, until the time comes to make the proper dramatic revelation.

UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

As we discussed in the lesson on Mode, a first-person narrative can be used to misdirect the reader because of the protagonist's bias. One of the masters of this kind of narrator is crime writer, Jim Thompson. In one book, his narrator tells about a brutal bit of domestic abuse where he had pushed his wife into a full bath. Later, he tells the story again, but this time it's a good-natured bit of joshing and falling that ended with both of them laughing. You realise that he's lying to us and himself by editing his past. It is a fantastic insight into a character that makes you feel very close to the story. You can misdirect your readership because they will trust a first-person narrator right up until the point they are given cause not to.

TWIST

In *Magic* by William Goldman, the reader is told that a magician has a dummy, 'Fats', planted in the audience to heckle him. The act becomes a comedy act based around the banter between the magician and Fats. As the novel progresses, we see their personal relationship develop through off-stage conversations until, one night, an argument becomes increasingly vicious and personal. It escalates until the magician stands up, picks Fats up, folds him in half, crams him into a suitcase and slams the lid shut. At that moment the reader realises that it is a literal dummy, not the technical term for a plant which we had assumed. In an instant, the reader's entire understanding of the novel crumbles away and they are shown the true situation. It's an extraordinary feeling.

LAST LINE REVEAL

Some writers will leave the twist until the very last moment, like H. H. Munro, who wrote under the name of Saki. These magnificent stories end with a last line – or last word – that is like a punch in the stomach. One of Saki's stories sees two noblemen of warring estates caught in a storm in an adjoining woodland. At first they argue and threaten one another about what they will do when their men arrive to rescue them but as times go on, they decide that they will help one another and end the rivalry. Eventually, they see figures and movement in the distance. The light is failing so they cannot see whose men it is. But the last one-word line of the story reveals everything – "Wolves".

WRITER MISDIRECT THYSELF

As an author, you can deliberately misdirect yourself. A female crime writer, Patricia Highsmith I believe, used to write about the murder and the reactions before she knew who had committed the murder. About two-thirds through writing the book, it would hit her who must have been the murderer and she would then go back and make a few minor changes to strengthen that. The value of this technique is that if she didn't know who the murderer was during the early chapters, there was no way she could even unconsciously telegraph that to the reader.

This happened to me writing the science fiction comic strip *The Ballad of Halo Jones*. In the first story arc we are introduced to the titular character, an ordinary young woman living on a gigantic hoop tethered just off Manhattan for housing poor people so that better-off people won't have to look at them. She lives in a shared house with an older woman who owns a robot dog called Toby, an artificial intelligence and fierce killing machine that is for the older lady's protection. I wrote Halo Jones on a hazardous shopping trip but realised the dog would spoil the story as they couldn't get into any trouble. So I got the robot dog to take a shortcut and leave them to it. When they got home, they find that the old lady has been killed in their absence. The vengeful robot dog departs in chase of the assailant and Halo heads off into space as a hostess upon a luxury liner. In the second book, the robot dog accompanies her into space because the old lady left him to her. It was at that point I realised that the dog had killed his elderly owner so that he could be with Halo, who he had fallen madly in love with. That gave me a magnificent plot twist to end the second book that was an enormous surprise to the reader because it was an enormous surprise to me.

So, in summary, misdirection is an enormously invaluable and irreplaceable tool for any aspiring writer… unless I'm lying.

EXERCISE

Try writing a short story without plotting it out. Misdirect yourself by having no idea where you are going and seeing what happens. Whodunnit?

Part Four : Cast & Setting ~
17. Character

Start from the assumption that any individual, in different circumstances, could have been any other individual. Thus, we can consider identity as an infinitely faceted crystal of which we choose to polish just one face.

By exploring other aspects, other faces of that crystal, you can imagine a whole range of alternate personalities for yourself. How would you think if you were of a different gender/race/morality/historical period/species?

You are going to be inhabiting these characters and you want to do it with conviction because you are trying to convince your readers that these are real people. So, let them be real people.

HAND THEM THE PEN

You should come to know your characters so well that you will reach moments you had plotted that you now realise they would never do. This is the point where your characters are almost alive. Even if it throws your plot off, you should always listen to what your characters are saying. The point where your characters start dictating to you can be quite a surprising and eerie experience. When I was writing *Watchmen*, writing as the semi-psychotic, right-wing vigilante Rorschach, it occurred to me that he hates himself and wants to die. So I had to refigure the ending based on what the character had told me about himself. Listen to your characters and what they're trying to tell you with their words and actions because it can be very surprising.

BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Sometimes, you will be writing about genuine historical individuals, and that is a slightly different research-based process. When researching the royal surgeon, Sir William Withey Gull, for my book *From Hell*, I looked at every detail of the man's life – his childhood as the son of a bargee; how the family's circumstances changed when the railway started to replace barges; his early interest in nature, including biology. I was portraying him as a culprit of the Jack the Ripper murders and getting to know his politics, his worthwhile accomplishments and philosophy, would help me portray him as a nuanced individual, as well as the most famous serial murderer in British history. I didn't want the stereotypical image of Jack the Ripper, simply a figure with a top hat and a raised knife, but a real person that the audience would be able to understand. The only way of accomplishing that is through research.

THREE-DIMENSIONAL HEROES & VILLAINS

For your heroes to have any weight and resonance, you had better ensure your villains have the same. Even the most terrifying serial murderer should be written as a three-dimensional individual, so do try to get inside their personality. When writing *V for Vendetta*, I considered how to portray the fascist secret state without reducing them to two-dimensional cartoons. I thought they would be perfectly ordinary people – bakers, street cleaners, cobblers and teachers – who had a very bad national experience. Some might be trying to do their best in a horrible regime, some going along with it because they're frightened, while others might be actively enjoying the feeling of power. It's important to empathise with villains because, otherwise, they can end up as completely predictable travesties.

The Show, a film I created with Mitch Jenkins, had an incredible number of characters, who all had narratives. There were no secondary characters, they all had story arcs and three-dimensional personalities. We told the actors to play it as if the whole film is about you, because that's how it works in real life. We all think that the whole film is about us. We are the centre of the narrative. The interaction of characters is generally a bunch of people interacting while all believing that the story is entirely about them. That is how three-dimensional characters behave.

BORROW FROM ACTORS

You don't have to go full method and start living as your characters, but it's not a bad idea to position yourself in front of a mirror and think about how the character feels and looks, physically. Try and inhabit them.

When I was writing an existing character for the *Swamp Thing* series, the Demon, I did just this. How to embody a bright-yellow demon from hell who spoke in rhyme? So I sat down in front of a mirror and thought about a short, squat figure. Perhaps more dense than human beings, so his posture would be weighted down and he'd be fiercely solid. And hot. There would be an internal furnace that drove him to ferocity. I attempted this low, inhuman growl and there he was. Once you've got the character's voice, the way they stand and their body language, the way they think will follow on from that. This is the importance of inhabiting a character in the way an actor does.

THE SPECIFIC BECOMES UNIVERSAL

When constructing a character, you will be taking things from your own life. Thoughts you've had, impressions you've had of people, and so on. I would advise you to look really deep into your own memories. Try to find those affecting moments that are unique to you because if we talk about something specific with enough passion, detail and reality, then it becomes universal. It strikes a chord somewhere deep in every human because, even if they haven't had that precise experience, they have had something like it and thought it was something that had only happened to them.

This brings us to what is perhaps the most majestic power of art and writing. If we see an experience we thought was uniquely ours in a painting, film or novel, we feel less alone. And that is very possibly the ultimate purpose of all art and writing.

EXERCISE

Sit in front of your mirror and embody your main character. Have them rehearse a speech, stand like them, mimic them smiling or giving themselves a pep talk. How do you feel in their shoes?

Part Four : Cast & Setting ~
18. Extreme Character

At some point during your writing career, you will probably be called upon to create characters that are not only beyond your experience but potentially beyond human experience altogether. At the shallow end this might include insane or psychopathic characters but there are also supernatural figures, aliens, inanimate objects or severed heads on spikes.

HEAD ON A SPIKE

In my novel, *Voice of the Fire*, I told the gunpowder plot from the point of view of a decomposing head on a spike. That experience doesn't exist, so I had to use my imagination. I put myself in that position and thought that probably my brains would have long since disintegrated, so that one of the few clinging relics might start to itch. What would I do to relieve it? Perhaps contrive to rock my skull back and forwards slightly upon the spike. What would I be thinking? The birds would have taken my eyes, but I might still be able to hear. If you make it realistic enough, you can imagine yourself into any possible situation and create a real and unrepeatable experience for your readers.

ALL-SEEING EYE

For my novel *Jerusalem*, I wanted a completely omniscient character who could see everything that was happening to all of the characters in the story, irrespective of which time period they were in. I decided to make a statue of the archangel Michael in Northampton the still pivot around which the rest of the book is revolving, the thing that can see everything with his carven stone eyes. He is the absolute observer who knows everything that is happening to every character, everything that happened to their ancestors and everything that will happen to their descendants in a thousand years' time.

AN ACT OF WILLING POSSESSION

If you create a particularly compelling character, good or evil, it will colour your own personality. It's like an act of willing possession, you've invited these people into your head and they may stay around for a while. When I was writing *From Hell*, Sir William Withey Gull was a very compelling presence. Family and loved ones would note that, after writing, I would have a very sardonic, Victorian manner that I wore like a cloak.

FRANCHISE CHARACTERS

You may reach a point in your career where you are called upon to handle franchised characters, those that you have not created and do not own. These generally come in two forms: those that aren't doing well and untouchable legends. In the latter case, the only thing you can do is look back at the past of that character, see what worked about it and try to emphasise that as a way of celebrating the qualities of the character rather than revisiting them.

The ones that aren't doing well are your best bet because if their sales figures are that low, then you are probably being offered the character as a last-ditch act of desperation. This gives you a splendid opportunity for making it much better.

I had such an opportunity with *Swamp Thing*, a comic created in the early seventies about a scientist who's fallen into swamp and arises as this green swamp monster that looks like it's made out of vegetation. It had a certain appeal – it was a big swamp monster – but had huge limitations.

'SOLVE ET COAGULA'

With solve et coagula, you analyse something to find out why it isn't working as well as it could, then put it back together in a hopefully improved way. This is what I did with *Swamp Thing*. Taking it apart I realised that there's no way the scientist didn't die. Armed with the knowledge of a horrid worm experiment where knowledge was transferred through ingestion, I made the swamp's organisms absorb information from the scientist's corpse, so the Swamp Thing wasn't a transformed human being at all – he was a plant that thought it had been a human being. Or, as I've put it, 'a ghost dressed in weeds'. Sales soared and everybody was very pleased with me.

DO THE RIGHT THING

Even extreme characters should have integrity, so listen to them and have them act in a way that is right for them, no matter how horribly the narrative will call for you to treat them. Treat them as if they are your friends, albeit friends that regrettably you sometimes have to kill.

EXERCISE

Apply the formula 'solve et coagula' to a story that you dislike. Can you dissect and reassemble it in an improved form?

Part Four : Cast & Setting ~
19. Place

Place is incredibly important. Understanding place will greatly help your story and help you understand the psychology of your characters. The world in which a character spends their life has its effects upon them.

WALK WITH AGENDA

The method for investigating real places is perhaps a little bit complex and time consuming but it certainly pays off. There is a popular term called **psychogeography** or 'walking with an agenda' as Iain Sinclair calls it, that explores people's experiences and history with a place.

Here's an example from a performance I did at the Highbury Garage in London. I started to research the whole of Highbury and its history and discovered the following…

- Under the Holloway Road is the double-headed Hackney Brook, an underground river that rises from two sources.
- Highbury Hill was one of London's pleasure hills, boasting all of the most exotic acts of its day, including Chang and Eng, the world's first conjoined twins.
- More recently the Highbury Garage had been run by an entrepreneur called Freddie Bird, who had connections with a lot of East End villains. One night he stopped Jack 'The Hat' McVitie creating uproar during a Dorothy Squires performance.

I noticed a link – the Kray twins, the double-headed Hackney Brook, Cheng and Eng the conjoined twins. There's something about things with two heads that seems to be underlying the landscape of Highbury. This became the basis for the story I told at Highbury Garage.

There are wonderful little connections that you could only spot by being on the ground, but sometimes that won't be possible. When I was starting the *Swamp Thing* series, I asked the comic company which swamp he was the 'thing' of. Having never considered this before, they guessed it might be the Florida Everglades or Louisiana. I went with Louisiana because I like the music from there and so started to research with a local phrase book, a book of local slang, a map of the state and perhaps some individual towns, and a record of jukebox hits. I read about its history and learned that Spanish moss and water hyacinths grow there and that they have blue herons.

You don't need very much and you will already know more about the place than most of the people that are living there. If you walk down a street and you know its history, all of the rich circumstances that have led up to that place, it will be like walking down a fantastic avenue of glory and mythology. Find out about places and make them burn with meaning and significance again, and you will find that the people living there will burn with meaning and significance.

Part Four : Cast & Setting ~
20. Creating Place

In this lesson, we tackle the creation of a wholly imaginary landscape or environment. To create a world is challenging but it is certainly not beyond your capabilities.

INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

It doesn't matter how weird and fantastical it is, the rules of your world should be self-consistent. Whether it's a world like Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea*, or the fabulous and horrifically overgrown Eden of Brian Catling's extraordinary *Vorrh* trilogy, you can keep it consistent.

TEXTURE

Texture is one of the first things the reader will be looking for to make it feel like a real world. By texture, I mean all the trappings that we find around us in society – advertisements, scraps of news broadcasts, television programmes, songs on the radio. We did this for *The Show*, which was based in Northampton, but not our Northampton: I wrote songs with musicians so that we could make the musical backdrop of the world keyed into the ideas that we were discussing; we came up with imaginary television shows, like a soap opera focused around German philosophy called Wittgenstein Terrace; products like Pet Noodles (like Pot Noodle with sinister pictures of missing pets on the containers); a celebrity magazine called Clammy.

PLACE AS CHARACTER

In some circumstances, the place can almost be the most important character in a narrative. In *The Show*, the recent feature film I wrote and took part in, we were lucky enough to have the collapsed bankrupt township of Northampton to ourselves. We were able to set a nightmare hanging in the actual place where these executions had taken place, all the way through showing shots of extraordinary buildings unique to Northampton.

The same can be said of books like Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*, where the castle Gormenghast is a physical presence that is altering the lives of all of the characters in the book.

PLACE AS STORY INSPIRATION

If you look at any place deeply enough, I am convinced it will have a spectacular story to tell you. At first glance, some places might seem devoid of anything interesting in their history or appearance but look again. Émile Zola saw a fantastic dreamland in the rings of sedate red-brick suburbs radiating out from London and imagined endless novels from such a surreal landscape. Wherever you live, there is something sacred and fascinating about that ground on which you are standing. It is your duty as a writer to excavate the meaning from that ground and convey it to your readers.

EXERCISE

Visit the place you are writing about. In person, if possible, but by research if not. What can you find out about its history, formative characters and psychogeography?

IN MEDIA RES

For the *Halo Jones* comic strip, I wanted to immerse the readers in the reality of this 50th-century world that I was imagining. I dumped the readers in media res – where you drop them right in the middle of everything without explaining it. They arrive halfway through a news broadcast talking about unfathomable things using unfathomable slang – things like a celebrity called Algae Baron Lux Roth Chop, who you have never heard of. This gives the reader the sense of being dumped in a real place and having to figure it all out, which is a satisfying experience for the reader because we delight in figuring things out.

THE CREATOR

Creating a place is almost a god-like experience. You create every element, every atom of that world, every person in it and every interaction. It can be a heady, exhilarating and, importantly, a totally immersive experience for you, and for the reader.

CREATING NEOPOLIS

Top 10 came about because I wanted to create a superhero team. Often these team franchises don't give enough attention to individual characters, so I considered a form that I knew handled a large cast well – the American police drama. The only way a superhero police force would work though, is if they were working in a city where everybody else had superpowers too. I started to conceive of a world where 1930s America was so fed up with superheroes disrupting life with space invasions that they put them all in a city specially built for them. This was the beginning of Neopolis.

In Neopolis, everybody has superpowers. The only people using their powers to enforce the law are the police department, the rest of the population are short order chefs using their heat vision to grill hot dogs or super-speed pizza deliverers.

Building Neopolis from the ground up, I needed to consider what social issues might be prevalent. With so many supernatural characters and aliens with all sorts of appearances, I didn't think racism would occur, but there would be bigotries of some sort. In Neopolis, it's the robots that are second-class citizens, referred to contemptuously as 'clickers' and living in a ghetto known disparagingly as 'Tin Town'.

Here, the place was offering me plot ideas. If I introduced a robot policeman, conflict and drama could ensue. And further, what about super pets? And pest control?

We did one storyline where a pest control officer – the Exverminator – releases super-powered cats to get rid of the mice. This ends up inciting a war between animal deities and it concludes with one god altering reality and time so that the initial infestation didn't even happen.

This is the kind of thing you need to consider if you are going to think seriously about these absurd places and situations.

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EXERCISE

Read a novel or watch a film set in an imagined world. What is used to create texture and build up a sense of cultural cohesion? Are there newspapers, magazines, songs or other cultural touchpoints? How does the economy work?

Part Four : Cast & Setting ~
21. Period

Period might be yet more influential in shaping a world and its characters. So, I would advise learning to love the processes of research because you are going to do an awful lot of it.

AH, MEMORIES

To a certain degree, you can use your own recollection to enhance your depiction of a period. A story set in the sixties or seventies, for example, I would colour with my own impressions but I would have to research further. We miss quite a lot and don't necessarily understand the times we are living in.

PROVIDENCE

In my book *Providence*, I mapped the writings of H. P. Lovecraft onto a specific time and place. I situated his imaginary towns like Arkham in real American locations like Manchester in New Hampshire and Athol, Massachusetts, for his imaginary Dunwich. For the time, I thought that the best year would be just before Lovecraft had commenced his stories, which would be circa 1919. I made my central character a journalist so that he would have plenty of motive for making investigations across the country, which is what I needed him to do to tell my story. I decided it would be in New York and that he would probably be both Jewish and gay, as it might spark interestingly off Lovecraft's regrettable antisemitism and homophobia.

I researched what papers a journalist might work for in 1919's New York and found that the New York Herald had its offices in Herald Square, surrounded by a statue of the goddess Athena, stone owls and brass owls on the roof. It also had telephones and a pneumatic document delivery tube system. Those don't look like the ones you've seen in films and we eventually managed to find a picture where they looked like a glass stirrup pump. These are the sort of details that are invaluable if you're trying to conjure a real time.

The story starts in July 1919, when the papers were full of the Versailles Treaty after the closure of the First World War, when Germany had new restrictions put upon it that people worried would inevitably lead to a second world war. It was also the time of the first Red Scare, after the Russian Revolution in 1917. Governments around the world were terrified that it might happen in their own countries, and started to crack down on union activities. This resulted in strikes and an awful lot of unrest. My character visited Boston, the site of a couple of Lovecraft's most important stories and also, the horrific Boston police strike of 1919. They had just dealt with the explosion of the molasses plant in Boston, which saw a three-foot wave of molasses rushing down the streets – children, horses, men and women getting trapped in it like flies on sticky paper. Unbelievable stuff which I could work into my story.

DETAILS

I became perhaps a bit obsessive with the historical detail to the point that, discovering Lovecraft had researched the weather and phases of the moon, I decided that I couldn't have this long-dead racist author getting some sort of benefit over me, and so did the same. It worked out really well. I was able to convey a time jump with different phases of the moon and discovered that January 1920 saw New York covered in snow, which made my final scenes in a park particularly picturesque. Find out all the details you can. By tracking down 1919 street plans for places like Athol (Manchester), I was able to know exactly what street my characters would have to walk down to get from A to B. It gives incredible confidence and authority to your writing that will convey itself to the reader.

ANACHRONISMS

Watch out for anachronisms, as they can pull you out of the period quite forcefully. In *Boardwalk Empire*, Stephen Graham as Al Capone compared a character with half a tin mask on his face to Frankenstein. Although Mary Shelley had written the novel in 1815, and Thomas Edison had produced a silent short film in 1910, a semi-literate Chicago gangster is not going to be referencing a Mary Shelley novel in 1920. Similarly, Steve Buscemi's character greets his stepchildren as munchkins. While L. Frank Baum's novel was written, nobody would have been referencing *Wizard Of Oz* characters until the MGM film in the thirties. This sort of thing can completely destroy a sense of period. Perhaps not everybody will notice, but there will always be people like me who will and probably bear a grudge against you for the rest of your life. And you don't want that.

SPEECH & SLANG

A lot of what creates a sense of period will be the dialogue and idiom. I would advise using a dictionary of historical slang to build a glossary of slang for the time and place your story is set in, say 18th-century America. You can even use the study of language to inform periods when we don't have any idea how the people in that time talked. In my novel *Voice of the Fire,* I used a number of first-person narrators in Northampton, from its Neolithic origins right through to the present day. Chapter One featured an outcast Neolithic boy and I had to consider how he would speak and think. I studied aboriginal languages and discovered that a lot of them only have one tense and very limited vocabularies. This was a key to inventing my Neolithic English, building a vocabulary of less than 500 words. This is astonishingly small as, by all accounts, you need a vocabulary of 10,000 words to even understand *The Sun*. This resulted in a long chapter, because a limited vocabulary means it takes longer to say things. It may be impenetrable to some readers, but it certainly conjured the time and the psychology of the individual talking. With each subsequent chapter I did the same, considering what the average person in Northampton would know at that time.

While place is of tremendous importance, we can never forget the importance of the moment, the particular era, the particular age. The time.

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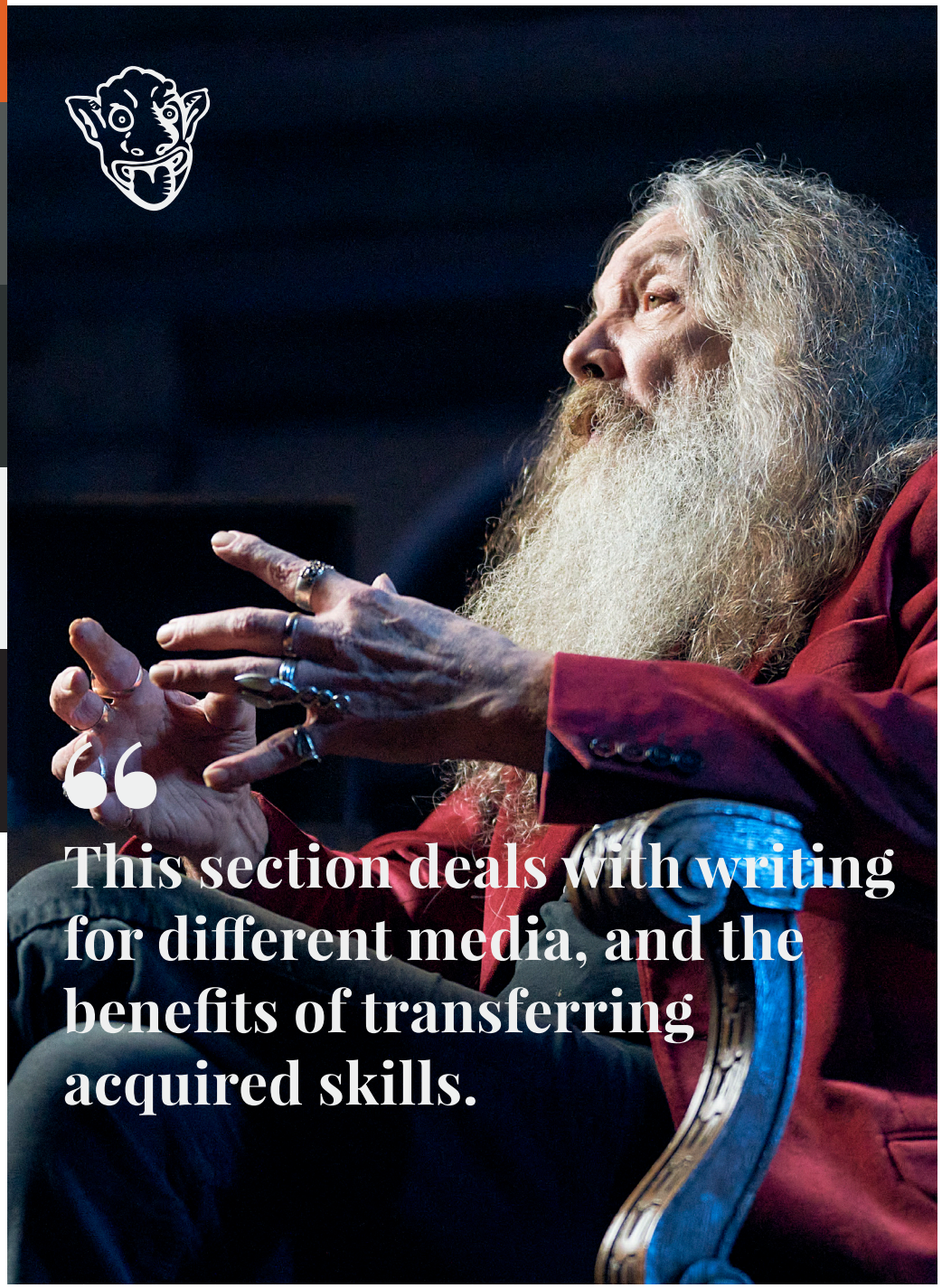
EXERCISE

Pick a period in history – perhaps one that interests you or one you know nothing about – and compile a list of slang from that time using ***Green's Dictionary of Slang***. Use this list to create a first-person short story or poem from that period.



Part Five : A Variety Of Forms ~
22. Considering Media

You might enjoy a varied career as a writer, creating work for a number of different media, each with its own advantages and drawbacks.

THE ADAPTATION CURMUDGEON

Each medium has its own unique laws, things that it does splendidly and things it can't do at all. This is probably why I am so unreasonably cranky about adaptations. I don't see the logic of taking something which is perfectly realised as a comic book, novel, or even a film, and then realising it in another medium. The only advantage is financial, nothing to do with aesthetics or art; it is about squeezing the last few drops of money out of an idea by realising it as a computer game. Media are not interchangeable. If you are writing a comic, write it to the best of your ability and write it using those things that only a comic book can do. The same with a novel or film. Concentrate on the things that a novel does, or a film does, and no other media can do.

Yet I see people writing their novels with one eye on the film adaptation. That won't work. They won't make a film of your novel because you had a cinematic opening scene where you could imagine one of the characters looking just like Jodie Foster. Instead, they will ignore the novel because it is not playing to its own strengths. William Goldman's book *Magic* lost the incredible twist when it was adapted to film, as it was obvious from the start that the character referred to as the dummy planted in the audience is a literal dummy. Similarly, David Lynch's *Eraserhead* cannot be imagined as anything but a film, and there would be no point doing a graphic novel adaptation.

If you are writing a movie then play to the visual spectacle that film is capable of, the things that wordless sequences in movies or comic books can achieve, all the things that a novel can't do. If you are writing a novel, play with person, tense, language and all the strengths of the medium. If you do this focused work in a number of fields it will enrich your writing.

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

A lot of writing skills can be used across disciplines. You will find that working on a film screenplay will give you a better sense of cutting and pacing that you can transfer to your other writing. While techniques of meter and rhythm used in poetry can help you enthral the reader of your prose fiction.

Essentially, by covering different disciplines and media, you can become better at all of them. If you get the chance, play around in other fields. If there's a field that doesn't appeal to you because you've never tried it, then try to overcome your apprehension and plunge into it. You will probably find that you are much better than you imagined you were, simply with the skills that you have acquired through working in a variety of media.

Part Five : A Variety Of Forms ~
23. Comic Cuts

Here we arrive at the inevitable part of the course where we enter the nightmarish vortex of working in the comics industry.

BOO, COMICS!

Comics is one of the most sublime media in the world. It is also one of the most voracious and kleptocratic industries, so I would advise avoiding until it has proper publishers who do not work to robbery targets.

HOORAH, COMICS!

None of this takes away from the extraordinary power of comics as a medium. Capable of most of the literary effects described thus far, comics also have the sizeable added dimension of a sequential visual narrative. Unlike a movie, you can sit and ponder over the images and words for as long as it takes to absorb them. This gives you the opportunity to use the images as a separate 'track' on which to convey some aspects of the story, potentially freeing up the text to talk about something else. This can create striking juxtapositions, provide counterpoint, or any number of novel effects. It also makes the comic form surprisingly elastic and able to contain immense amounts of information.

SCIENCE-OFFICIAL ELASTICITY

When I was working on *Brought to Light*, I managed to fit in a mass of CIA information from the end of the Second World War, right up to the Iran-Contra affair – lots of sums of money, massacres, arms deals, drug deals, hundreds of names of conspirators and their associates. Thanks to the comics medium's startling elasticity, I was able to do

a very elegant job getting all of that information in there, even having a couple of pages left over for little bit of extravagance that I'd added to the narrative to make it look that much more perfect.

In fact, there was a Pentagon study where they were anxious to find out the best way of conveying information in a form that would be understood and retained. They tried straight text, text with photographs, text with illustrations, and they tried comics. Will Eisner's world's worst Marine character would have the essentials of military life explained to him – how to assemble and disassemble your rifle – and it turned out of all of the methods of conveying information to soldiers, this was the one they would absorb and remember. Perhaps comics has a bigger future as an educational tool than in the entertainment medium.

COMICS 101

In case you ignore my warnings and wish to work in the comics industry, it might be helpful if I give you the basics.

~ AVOID REDUNDANCY

Don't have a caption telling you that the hero goes downtown to sort things out if the panel has a picture of the hero going downtown to sort things out. That's redundancy.

~ STICK TO THE RATIO

Mort Weisinger, disciplinarian editor on *Superman* back in the sixties, said that if you've got a six-panel comic book page, you could have no more than 35 words per panel. So divide 210 words per page by the number of panels. Keep to that religiously.

~ START WITH A STORY MAP

If it's a 24-page story, write the number one to 24 down in a column and map out what happens on each page.

WE'VE ONLY JUST BEGUN

With all these wonderful magic tricks, you can do nearly anything. And, given that comics in its modern form is a relatively young medium, there is the added advantage that there is still a whole world out there for writers with adventurous minds to explore. Just don't come crying to me saying I didn't warn you.

Part Five : A Variety Of Forms ~
24. Screen Gems

Just as any writer should fully acquaint themselves with the English language, I would advise any screenwriter to acquaint themselves with cinematic language. The way to do this is to study (and read intelligent critiques of) masters such as Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Jean Cocteau and others, in this way acquiring a cinematic vocabulary.

HITCHCOCK'S GEMS

Reading François Truffaut's book about Alfred Hitchcock was a revelation for me. He was explaining how Hitchcock achieved his effects in films like *Psycho*, shot by shot. I remember the scene in *Psycho* where one of the detectives is suspicious there might be something unusual on the upper floor of the Bates Motel. The first shot is the detective looking up the stairwell, low-angled and looking up, which means that what you are looking up at is placed in a position of power, psychologically. In that instance, the audience's tension increases because the detective is considering going upstairs but we feel the unknown power because of the way the image is set up. When the detective climbs the stairs it switches to an overhead shot, so that the audience is in the position of power but helpless to intervene. Whatever happens you are trapped looking at it from this position. This is the exact point at which the apparently crazy old lady (which we later find to be Norman Bates himself) comes running out of the landing and stabs the detective to death – while we look on, helplessly.

The angle at which you look at something will affect the psychological mood of the shot. This is something that I've learned a great deal about when it came to writing for comics because it uses the same principles.

SYD FIELD'S GEMS

Malcolm McLaren gave me a copy of ***Screenplay*** by Syd Field when we were working on the film *Fashion Beast*. It includes wonderful advice for any writer, but particularly for screenwriting.

PROCRASTINATION

One of the most important lessons comes in the early chapters, where he confronts our natural inclination to procrastination. In my case, my working-class guilt takes over and I get my arse onto the chair. This is the biggest problem in any field of art: getting your arse onto the chair. If you can do that, the rest of it will be a breeze. According to Syd Field, you will find the same problem at the end of the screenwriting process. Tinkering becomes a problem and you have trouble moving on. Just know what you're doing, know that you're procrastinating and then get over it.

THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

I mentioned earlier that Syd Field was also the exponent of the simple three-act screenplay. It's best to consult his book, but here's a swift introduction.

~ ACT ONE: SET-UP

You begin by establishing all of your characters, their environment and situations, so that the viewer has a good idea of the kind of story and a possible structure. They might even try to guess the ending.

~ ACT TWO: CONFRONTATION

The second act pursues the same ideas that were set up in Act One, but brings them to a surprising conclusion that completely redefines what people have understood from the film so far, and what they expect as an ending.

~ ACT THREE: RESOLUTION

The sudden twist at the end of the second act propels the action to a startling climax at the end of the third act.

These acts do not have to be of equal length. If everything is set up, you might have the big twist earlier on in the film, whatever seems to be the most dramatically suitable.

RESONANT DIALOGUE

One thing that will greatly aid any screenplay is continuous resonant dialogue: no throwaway lines, keep the dialogue sparkling all the way through. Avoid expositional dialogue, where you use a character to explain the plot of the film. If you need to explain plot points, do it in a memorably amusing or dramatic way so that you don't waste any of the opportunities that a line of dialogue would offer you.

You should be able to identify your characters by their dialogue, even if they are not on screen. Think about who is delivering the line and see if you can craft the line to reveal a little more about their character and psychology.

This is a great way of filling out characters. With a great line of dialogue, they will be immensely memorable.

A WORD ON WRITING FOR TELEVISION

This is something that I have less experience of, although I did write a projected five-season television series which will almost certainly never be made. It did, however, give me some idea how you should lay these things out. Foremost was that I knew the ending before I started - what the last shot in the last episode of the last season was going to be.

I cannot underline how important this is. I have given up on boxsets where it becomes apparent that the writers are making it up as they go along. The shapeless narrative drift is a terrible experience for both the writer and for the viewer, having invested hours watching to discover that there wasn't any meaningful ending. It is important in any medium to know your ending first, but in something as long form as television it is vital.

(**BBC Maestro** would no doubt be delighted if I pointed you to Jed Mercurio's TV writing course here, but I am naturally above such commercial vulgarity.)

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EXERCISE

Read Syd Field's book and plot your story out using his three-act structure.

Part Five : A Variety Of Forms ~
25. Words, Music & Performance

We talked earlier about improving yourself by trying other forms of writing. I have always enjoyed songwriting. I cannot play a single musical instrument, but I am lucky enough to have known and collaborated with some really good musicians.

LYRICS

Acquiring skills as a songwriter can be useful in a wider writing career, if only by demonstrating how supposedly decorative and flowery metre and rhyme can distil narrative information into a more compact form. That is why most of the great epics are told in verse.

MUSIC FOR PLACE

There are other benefits to being able to write a decent song or two. If you are world building for an imagined place, music can be a great way to insert texture and background culture for your characters and events. I wrote songs for the series *Top 10* to suggest character and to add atmosphere.

From a film industry point of view, it is also cheaper to write your own songs than pay extortionate royalties.

PERFORMANCE

Performing can be stressful but being able to captivate a couple of dozen people at a poetry reading will pay enormous benefits. You get immediate reaction from the audience, whereas in a normal writing career, the most perfect line of your life, permanent on a page, might get no response at all. A positive review or a warm letter, while welcome, is not the same as being able to tell in the moment whether your material and delivery are working or not. That's invaluable.
Even if it is just a chance to show off, if you get the chance to perform your work in any capacity, please take it.

REAL PEOPLE

A simple yet meaningful benefit is that you will be in a room with other people, otherwise the life of a writer can be a very solitary thing. Unlike some writers, I cannot go and sit in a coffee shop to create. I need complete silence and no interruptions, which leads to a condition of pretty much permanent isolation. In fact, when lockdown started, I thought that if the virus was created in a lab, it would have been by a writer. Lockdown is normal for writers like me. Never seeing your friends, never going out, hearing from people over the phone intermittently, being in a room on your own in complete silence – this is our existence.

BACKGROUND SILENCE

That brings me on to writing to music. I used to enjoy listening to music when I was a cartoonist but that's a different thing entirely. Cartooning can be done by some sort of vestigial brain that you have in your wrists. I used to listen to the John Peel show and it wouldn't affect my cartooning at all. Once you start writing, that all changes.

I realised that I couldn't listen to anything with lyrics because it would interfere with the words that I was trying to write. I moved on to purely instrumental pieces but was halfway through an album by John McLaughlin when the music was interfering with the rhythms that I was trying to write in. Listening to ambient music lasted a couple of months before I realised that was affecting the atmospheres I was creating. Some of my comic strips from that period feature huge captions focused on the way things sound, all because I was listening to a lot of Brian Eno and Harold Budd. Eventually I gave in to the silence.

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EXERCISE

Write a song that acts as a soliloquy for your main character.

Part Five : A Variety Of Forms ~
26. Future Media

Much like the shark, the printed book is a perfectly adapted form with little need for evolutionary change, that will probably still be with us in some form for as long as there are people. However, it will no doubt be frequently superseded by emergent technologies that demand new approaches to narrative, such as VR and the imminent launch of VR 'metaverses' from the big tech companies.

While at present such ventures seem mostly designed to facilitate data-harvesting, the technology might at some point become a genuine art form and a writer should be ready for that eventuality.

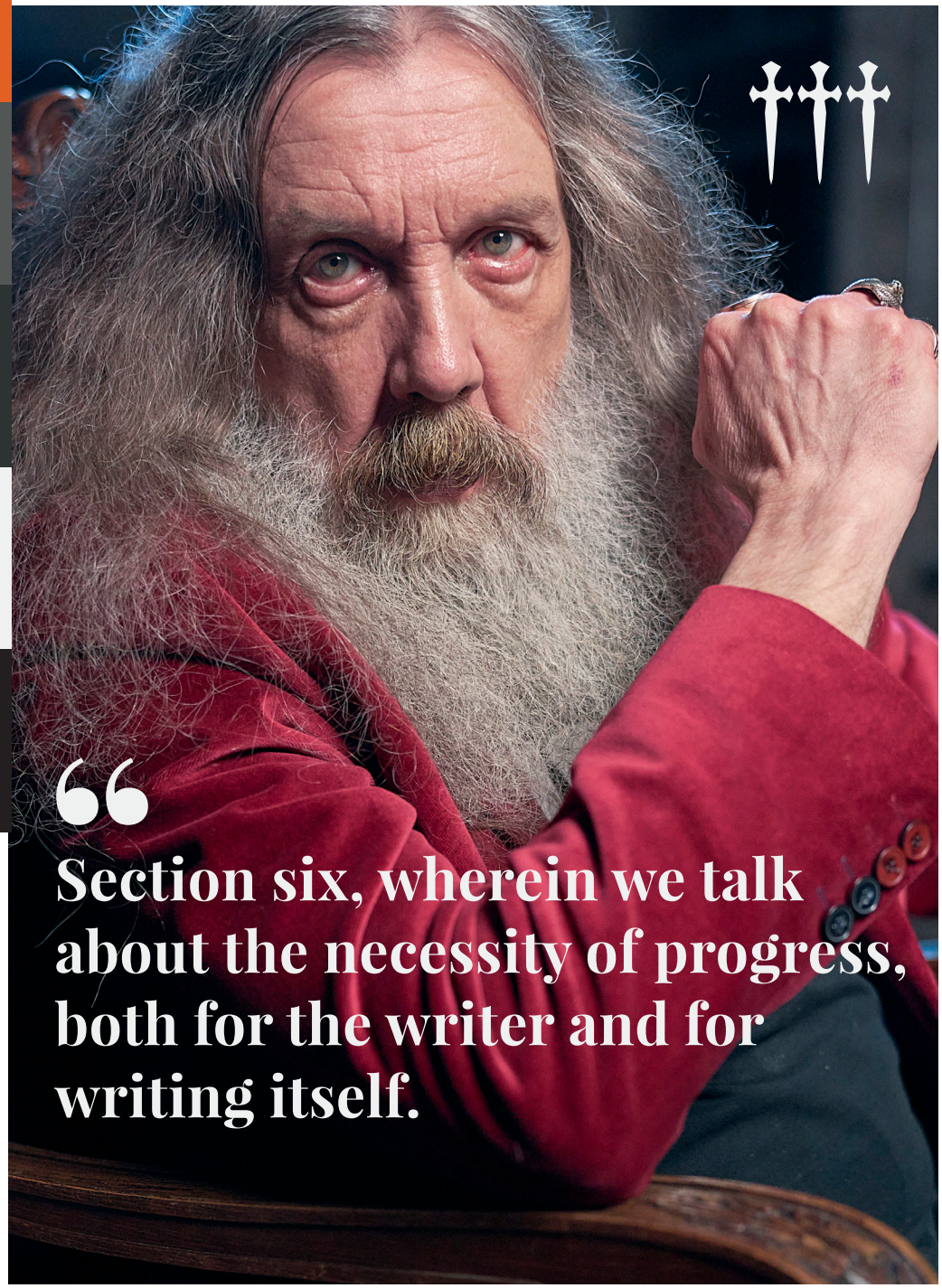
VIRTUAL REALITY

As with place in prose, texture will help create that global sense of culture in a completely wrap-around reality. The little details like newspapers, magazines, shops, songs playing on the radio – everything a person might experience in this virtual world.

It would also help to give all background characters a story arc and distinct personality to conjure meaningful interactions and give a completely immersive experience.

A good novel is still our best form of virtual reality but VR in its current technological form is very compelling. I can see it becoming problematic with people divorcing themselves from reality and immersing themselves in an imaginary universe. However, there are potential benefits that might come from such a technology like the transcendental states described by mystics. These are things that only happen in people's minds.

It is quite possible that by using virtual reality we might be able to move people into more useful states of consciousness in the same way the mystics have always apparently been able to do. With enough skill it is possible that virtual reality could move your audience into a higher level of consciousness.



Part Six : Progressive Writing ~
27. The Need For Progress

Another way in which writing resembles the shark, as posited above, is that if it doesn't keep moving forward, it will die.

THE GOLDEN RUT

One way that this death can occur, is the 'golden rut' that can afflict successful writers who have found a winning formula and then, effectively, choose to repeat it forever. This will probably lead to diminishing returns for the readership, but enough readers will want the same comforting book to maintain the author's career. However, their writing will stagnate. All of those other books that they might have written will never exist. I think it is a big mistake to rest upon your laurels, however tempting it is.

DROP IT

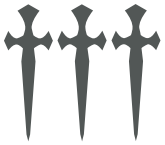
A tactic I have found most useful is to immediately drop a device as soon as you become aware you have used it before. This means that you will have to go the trouble of coming up with new devices for every story, which is a tremendous amount of work, but you will be progressing. You will not be a still dead shark in the water. For example, a simple device I used in *Watchmen* was to overlap dialogue, imagery, or even colour between one scene and the next. This device carries the reader through the changes in the narrative at a furious pace as well as being aesthetically pleasing. I noticed that when I did a Batman book, *The Killing Joke*, I was still using the same techniques. It seemed to add nothing new to my writing or extend it in any way, so I abandoned that device and tried radically different things. Of course you should retain learnings, but it is important to keep evolving.

Part Six : Progressive Writing ~
28. Forward Movements

AVANT-GARDE

The work needs to move forward as well as the individual as a writer. You need to have a progressive edge to writing that is constantly progressing. There has been a fairly comprehensive failure by most of the avant-garde to engage readers because much of the material is deliberately dissonant. However, I believe there are ways to use avant-garde techniques that will greatly enrich a story without turning the audience away in droves.

It is necessary to have a progressive attitude to writing because the rate of change is accelerating. I believe that in the present day, we will have more information in the next year than has existed in the whole of previous human history. The world around us is changing all the time so it is important for you as a writer to stay on top of that, and continue to move forward in your thinking and writing if you wish to survive the evolutionary changes that are already upon us.



It is important to note that the avant-garde is not somehow sectioned off from the rest of literature but part of the body of writing.

THE FIRST X

Things that were immensely avant-garde in their day will carry out a slow passage to the very heart of writing and culture until they are everywhere. Perhaps the first modernist or post-modern novel was Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, where the titular narrator is attempting to tell his life story. However, he becomes so digressive that he doesn't get past his birth. This is an incredibly modern – and funny – technique that was avant-garde at the time.

THE FIRST Y

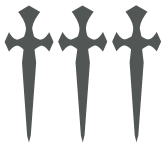
Another example would be Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, in which she introduced the 'stream of consciousness' writing technique. This is where you are inside a character's head, pursuing thought followed by thought. It is a very compelling rush of experience that, since Virginia Woolf, has been used by everybody from the Beat writers to the cyberpunks. It is now a technique at the centre of literature and is there for any writer to employ whenever they wish.

THE FIRST Z

Marcel Proust was the first person to write about involuntary memory in *Remembrance of Things Past (À la recherche du temps perdu,* also translated as *In Search of Lost Time*). As with Sterne and Woolf, Proust's was an approach that now pervades our culture, but was seen as radical at the time.

In most everyday writing you will find that using avant-garde techniques in otherwise non-avant-garde writing can be like adding a vital pinch of spice. It can enliven an entire work just by making some slight change to the way that you present it. It can make old ideas suddenly new again.

Patrick McGoohan's *The Prisoner* was relentlessly modernistic, using shifting levels of reality and modern approaches to psychology that were completely unheard of in television of the sixties. Yet the show was commissioned, and although it was dealing with strange, unprecedented things, it had an incredibly wide audience that seemed to go across all of the class barriers, so that people were discussing the philosophy in *The Prisoner* when they were in the newsagent buying a packet of cigarettes. It was a wonderful example of how pervasive the avant-garde can be, in the right hands. It should certainly not be overlooked by any writer.



Part Six : Progressive Writing ~
29. Approaches To The Future

The mathematician, Douglas Hofstadter, described creativity as a set of adjustable parameter dials that can be applied to any situation. As we saw earlier, by tweaking the dials on *Romeo and Juliet*, say, you can create *West Side Story*. What Hofstadter also said was that a genius is somebody who twists a dial that nobody else had noticed, something so fundamental to the way we tell a story that nobody had thought it could be changed. So that is one practical approach to progressive writing.

LITERARY DIFFICULTY

This is an idea I only heard about relatively recently, which I had been practising for most of my career. In writing *Voice of the Fire*, I wrote the first chapter in an impenetrable invented Neolithic language and many readers would have been put off. This is the idea of literary difficulty, whereby a writer uses a technique that she knows will reduce her audience, but will force those readers who remain to engage with the work on a deeper, more satisfying level.

AUDIENCE COLLABORATION

I think the art I have best responded to myself, is the art that has made me do some of the work, whether that be simply imagining what the characters look like or in understanding a difficult story point or a difficult way of approaching literature. It is extremely satisfying once you've cottoned on to it, then all of a sudden it opens up your vistas.

THE CUT-UP

I remember the first time that I read the writings of William Burroughs, the Beat writer who famously pioneered the cut-up technique. This is where you cut texts up and then put them together mismatched so that you get these accidental sentences emerging with completely exotic uses of words and grammar that can be very striking. Some of them will be junk, but the joy is in the selecting.

The first time I read it I found it completely alienating, but I slowly started to see the poetry in it and how one might add a random element to storytelling.

SCRUMPING FROM ACADEMIA

A useful way to mine genuinely progressive ideas is to look at what is circulating in academia. Some of them will seem strange or difficult to understand but if you persist, you can find some wonderful ways of looking at things in academic books.

I recently came across 'misprision', an academic term that – if I've got it right – means a wilful misunderstanding where you know that a certain idea is not correct but you use it anyway because it opens up creative possibilities. When I was preparing my H. P. Lovecraft opus, *Providence*, I was reading an awful lot of Lovecraft criticism including the so-called 'Cthulhu Mythos' that had been an invention of later writers and that Lovecraft himself would not have recognised. One psychologist, Dirk Mosig, suggested that all of Lovecraft's stories were intended as episodes of some gigantic hypernovel, that he was creating a new form of the novel that comprised these 30 or 40 fragmentary stories. While H. P. Lovecraft had not meant anything like that, with the concept of 'misprision' in my mind, I thought, 'But what if he had?' And so I began building that hypernovel and so came the plot structure for *Providence*.

PICK THEIR BRAINS

I would suggest also mining some of the writings in modern neuroscience. They are coming up with all sorts of interesting terminology to talk about how the reading experience affects us on a neurological level. It was there that I learned of the concept of indirect free discourse, where you can move from the inside of one character's stream of consciousness into another's, often in the space of a page. In being able to inhabit all of the different characters in a novel, the reader will apparently have a greater empathetic understanding of all of them, which will increase their involvement with the story. What is perhaps a throwaway concept to a neuroscientist is gold to a committed writer. Any scrap of technique that you could use that would give you a slight advantage over all of the other aspiring writers out there should be grasped with both hands.

Part Six : Progressive Writing ~
30. Lost In The Funhouse

In this penultimate segment, we discuss the dangers of progressive writing, taking the title of John Barth's iconic postmodern story collection. One story, *Night Swimmers*, sees the narrator and his companions swimming in this dark ocean. One by one, they perhaps sink until there are fewer and fewer of them until, eventually, the narrator continues to swim beneath the dark skies. It ends there and is never explained. It occurred to me a month or two after reading the story that they are sperm. It's a wonderful story in a truly brilliant collection.

However, it had a cautious rebuttal from the John Barth fan and writer, David Foster Wallace, who responded with a character from one of his stories asking, "But for whom is the funhouse fun?" The implication is that producing work that is only comprehensible to a handful of academics is all but futile. It is elitist and exclusionary, ruling out a large chunk of your audience by doing that.

There are some wonderful ways of writing progressive avant-garde material that is still immensely entertaining.

MULLIGAN STEW

As a catalogue of the pitfalls awaiting avant-garde writers and a salutary example of successful progressive writing, I recommend Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*, an ingeniously hilarious avant-garde novel about someone writing a dreadful avant-garde novel.

There are some wonderful touches in it. All of the characters in the novel get together in between scenes to discuss how the novel is going and previous books they featured in.

"In one job I threw my clothes on at least twenty times."

"My interest slackens when I'm forced to watch the smoke from my cigarette curl lazily in the air."

"Especially when it's blue smoke—and it's always blue smoke!"

One chapter was the writer's attempt at pornography and is one of the funniest pornographies that you will ever read. It was based on the style of Victorian pornographies with their very overblown language. You would have this sexual situation where the writer keeps describing the colour of the underwear being torn off the female participants. The writing gets so overwrought that some of the underwear is being ripped off numerous times and seems to be changing colours.

Another book of Gilbert Sorrentino you might want to look at is *Aberration of Starlight*, which is not funny so much as incredibly moving. It tells the story of a woman and her young son at a boarding house, and the arrival of a travelling salesman who might be a good romantic match for the young single mother. Each chapter is composed of three or four different parts, perhaps a letter that the character has written but not posted, a fantasy the character has had, and so on. You start to get an idea of how all of these people are misunderstanding each other. In fact, the title is an astronomical term that means the difference between where a star really is and where we perceive it as being.

DOCTOR HOFFMAN

There are obviously many more wonderful avant-garde writers. I might recommend Angela Carter's berserk Baroque fantasies that are like nothing else in science fiction, fantasy, or anything else for that matter. One of her early books, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, is a completely fluid landscape of changing genders and changing personalities.

INFINITE JEST

One of my favourite discoveries, one that many people had made long before me, is the writer David Foster Wallace, author of *Infinite Jest*. Wallace likes to take a basic institution, in this case a sports college training tennis players, but makes it represent the whole of society. The beauty of his work is his perverse sense of humour in the way that he relates with his readers. There are numerous footnotes, so you have to flip to the back of the book where the footnotes are there in order. Many people will miss this out, but you miss an awful lot of the narrative if you do so. At around page 400, I came to a character using a very unusual turn of phrase, so I turned to the footnote, which read, "No clue". I realised at that point that David Foster Wallace was, in fact, trying to annoy me and at that point I was in on the joke and really enjoyed it. He's employing literary difficulty to make the novel a challenge for the average reader, but that forces the reader to engage with the novel in a different way. All of David Foster Wallace's work is fascinating and a suitably enquiring and progressive writer will find much of value there.

All of these are examples of avant-garde writing which does amazing, progressive things with literature which, more importantly, is enormous fun for the reader, taking us back to John Barth and the importance of a funhouse actually being fun.

Part Six : Progressive Writing ~
31. The Evolution Of Writing

The evolution of writing seems to work pretty much the same way human evolution has worked. Both writing and DNA are predicated on language (one with 26 letters, one with four), and both are seemingly capable of endless permutations, countless dead-ends but many spectacular breakthroughs, all in the service of evolving towards a more perfectly adapted form.

When we talk about the evolution of writing, we are talking about the evolution of the individual writer and writing as a field. I would remind you of our opening statement, where we said that, in the Palaeolithic period, writing became our foremost means of modifying human consciousness itself.

I would like to welcome you, as an aspiring writer, to this enormously important and timeless human tradition. You are part of this society stretching back through the ages of shamans, magicians and writers who have done so much to shape the development of the human story. You can become part of this marvellous tradition and play your own part, however small, however large, in this marvellous enterprise of expanding the capacity of what human beings can think, or feel, or do, or say, along with the number of ways in which they can say it.

So, in conclusion, I would like to welcome every single one of you to this enormously important and transformative human tradition.

32. Extroduction

I would like to stress in this extroduction – and yes, that is a word I just made up (ah, the liberty of being a writer) – that **writing is for everybody.**

It is not just for me and people with my amazing haircut, it is for absolutely everybody, whatever the outcome of your writing career.

The most important thing is that you had a writing career. Writing will be your best friend. If your life is turning to rubbish, as life sometimes does, writing allows you to lose yourself in another world. The time that you are writing does not exist and, believe me, that can be an enormous comfort.

Most of the people I know who have started writing have become addicted to it. They might not necessarily be published, but the act of writing gives them a huge dimension in their life which is easily as powerful as meditation.

Writing is not only an excellent form of meditation that will enrich your life, but you also might get publishable work out of it that can transform your life materially as well.

There are so many benefits to writing. I cannot tell you how much richer my own life has been since becoming a writer 40 years ago. I urge you to open yourself up to the limitless opportunity and the limitless complexity that a life in writing will allow you.

So, in conclusion, I would like to ask you to please write responsibly, stop when the fun stops, and beware dodgy adverbs.

Now, I want every one of you to get out there and write me a better world, because this one is completely fundamentally flawed. And fucked.

Alan Moore

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