

## Letter to an MFA

By Josh Henkin

Like many fiction writers, I spend a lot of time in the classroom. I received my MFA in the early 1990s, and since then I have been teaching in MFA programs, trying to help aspiring writers improve their craft. What gives me pause, however, is the degree to which young writers view an MFA the way law students view law school: as a professional degree, a way to advance their career. Although many MFA graduates do get published, enrolling in an MFA program in order to get published strikes me as unwise.

I'm not arguing that it's simply a matter of being good and that publishing will take care of itself. It's just that the question of what gets published seems so arbitrary that the best thing I can do is focus on the writing and hope that sets my students on the right path. What a *New Yorker* reader wants to read, what a *Harper's* reader wants to read, shouldn't be on the mind of a writer, certainly not as she sits down to write.

But my students continue to worry about publishing, and though I can't entirely blame them (what writer doesn't worry about publishing?), there's an irony to their concern. The same students who want to publish their work are often curiously unconcerned with entertaining their readers, with doing what a friend of mine, a Pulitzer-Prize-winning novelist, calls the writer's principal obligation: to get the reader to dance with you. In short, they are reluctant to do—indeed, suspicious of doing—what is the cardinal requirement of every writer: to tell the reader a story.

This reluctance appears in various guises, but it comes down to the same thing: a belief, sometimes articulated, sometimes not, that story-telling is what hack writers do—it's the territory of Grisham and Crichton—and that to think about plot is beneath them, because they write literary fiction. Meanwhile, the Grishams and Crichtons of the world are laughing all the way to the bank. And since many of my students want to laugh to the bank themselves, it would behoove them to take seriously what writers of genre fiction know to take seriously: the need to tell a story.

With that in mind, I want to run through some of the most common ways MFA students avoid telling a story, as a window onto what can go wrong with MFA writing, and with literary fiction in general. I say this as someone who writes literary fiction and whose own reading tastes weigh heavily toward literary fiction, but who nonetheless sees some problems.

### Lack of Urgency

Anyone who's been to a Passover Seder is familiar with The Four Questions: "Why is this night different from all others?" From a liturgical standpoint, it's what makes Passover Passover. It's also, I would argue, what makes fiction fiction. When a writer sits down to write, he must always ask himself: What's important about today? Why have I chosen to tell my story now? What, in short, is the occasion for the telling? If the story can't answer this question, then no matter how well written it is, it's not a story; it's a mere event or a character sketch. But many practitioners of literary fiction don't understand this. They'll release their characters into the world and think that if the writing is good enough, nothing else matters.

Sometimes I'll tell a student that what they've given me feels less like a story than a slice of life. To which they'll say, "But aren't all stories slices of life?" Well, they are, in that a writer is always choosing some things and leaving out others. But a successful piece of fiction is very carefully sliced life. It's not someone haphazardly lowering a knife onto the pie and seeing what shape comes out.

### The Passive Protagonist and the Problem of Watching

I once had an undergraduate, a talented writer who wrote a story that could have been called "Stuff I Thought While I Was in my Car." Her protagonist drove somewhere, passed places she recognized, people she knew, and gave the reader her observations, often quite eloquent and insightful, about what she witnessed. Line by line, the material was quite good, but in no meaningful way was it a story. I think subconsciously my student was hoping that the forward movement of the car would substitute for a deeper narrative forward movement. But it didn't, and simply putting your character in a car will not make a story a story.

Now, the case of my undergraduate is extreme, but it's by no means unique. Time and again, my graduate students write stories in which the main character simply observes what takes place around her. On some level, this isn't surprising. We as a society spend a lot of time alone, and much of our contact with others is both inadvertent and anxiety-producing. On the subway, we avert our glances when someone catches our eye; we avoid knocking into people on the street. For our safety, and our sanity, we are conflict-averse, and writers may be temperamentally the most conflict-averse of all. We do our jobs alone in front of a screen, often in our underwear; we are born—or at least trained—to observe. But it's bad for a writer to be conflict-averse, at least bad for him to

be so on the page, because conflict is what makes for tension in stories, what pushes fiction forward and informs character.

“What’s wrong with watching?” a student will ask me, and I will say, “Nothing, if you do it in moderation.” Watching, after all, is part of the human experience. But if it’s all your protagonist does, then your story is going to be inert. That’s because watching is a passive process; it involves no action, no choice, and therefore it has no moral complexity. In a good story, a character is forced to make choices. And if you have trouble getting your characters to make choices, you need to put them in a situation where they have to choose. What if you’re seated on a bus and a stranger puts his hand on your thigh? You can scream; you can tell the person to remove his hand; you can, I suppose, encourage him; or you can do nothing at all. But in this instance, even doing nothing is doing something; not choosing is its own sort of choice. What I tell my students, then, is they have to make their characters do something. They need to put people’s hands on their characters’ thighs.

### The Victim Story

Almost as common as the watching story is the story about a character who’s been victimized. Bad things have been done to this person, and the story is a chronicle of how he’s been wronged, with an implicit plea that we feel bad for him. And we very well might. But this isn’t especially interesting because being victimized, unless it’s portrayed in a more complicated way, doesn’t involve choice, and choice, as I’ve been suggesting, is what gives stories tension and makes for complex characters. Another way to look at it is that rendering your protagonist powerless is a mistake, because a character needs a certain amount of power in order to behave badly, and behaving badly—or at least the

possibility of behaving badly—is what makes fiction interesting. Charles Baxter says as much in his wonderful book of essays *Burning Down the House*. Baxter, who teaches fiction writing himself, draws a distinction between “me” protagonists and “I” protagonists. “Me” protagonists, he argues, are characters to whom things are done, whereas “I” protagonists actually do something. In Baxter’s opinion, there are too many “me” protagonists out there, and I agree.

### The Story Where the Author is Trying to Make a Point

Years ago, a friend of mine wrote her undergraduate psychology thesis on the way adults group objects versus the way children group objects. Adults group the apple with the banana, whereas children group the monkey with the banana. Children, in other words, are more natural story tellers than adults. Part of teaching writing, then, is to get adults to think like children again. This involves convincing them that they’re not writing principally about big ideas. There’s room for ideas in fiction, certainly, but a writer’s job is to tell a story and the ideas come in only through the back door. When my students tell me that they want to write about loneliness, or about the ravages of war, or about how much pain there is in the world, I tell them in that case they should be writing philosophy, or political science, or sociology. As long as they’re writing fiction, they need to eschew the abstract for the concrete. It might be said that Lorrie Moore writes about lonely single women who use humor to cover up their pain, but you can be sure Moore didn’t think this way when she sat down to write “You’re Ugly, Too.” She started with Zoë and gave her a sister, then took Zoë on a trip New York to attend her sister’s Halloween party where she meets an eligible single man wearing a bonehead. That’s

how a fiction writer needs to think—in terms of Halloween parties and men wearing boneheads, not in terms of ideas about loneliness.

### A Practical Guide

MFA students often complain that their professors are better at saying what's wrong with their stories than at telling them how to make their stories right. This goes with the territory, I'm afraid; if there were a blueprint for how to be a great fiction writer, there would be more of them out there. That said, a first step is avoiding the common traps. Don't write stories where the occasion for the telling is unclear; don't write stories that are principally about watching; don't write victim stories; don't set out to make a point.

But I think the writing teacher can do better than that. Here, then, are some practical guidelines. First, how do you start a story? Most writers struggle between knowing too much at the beginning of a story and knowing too little. If you know too much, your story can't surprise you. You straitjacket your characters in a preordained plot, and you end up with what a friend of mine calls "Lipton-Cup-A-Story." On the other hand, if you know too little, you end up writing a lot of pretty sentences about mountains and sunsets that don't go anywhere. What I try to do is write about situations where conflict seems likely even if I don't know what that conflict will be. Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, Thanksgiving dinners, family reunions: these are all ripe for exploring, and they all answer the Passover question. A writing professor of mine once said that there are only two kinds of stories in the world, *Stranger Comes to Town* and *Person Goes on a Trip*. Which is really just one kind of story, since *Stranger Comes to Town* is simply *Person Goes on a Trip* from a different point of view.

Second, if you're stuck, open up your story. Add another character. Odd numbers are good. Two's company, three's a crowd, as roommates (and lovers) will tell you. Sometimes it's simply a matter of moving your characters somewhere else. A student of mine recently wrote a story about an elderly woman who invites her three children to her Brooklyn brownstone to discuss how she will divide her possessions once she has died. Now, this is a perfectly good situation for a story—good enough for Shakespeare in *King Lear*, and for Jane Smiley a few hundred years later. It's all in the execution, of course, and my student's execution was good—at least initially, but as the pages passed, the story started to repeat itself. There was plenty of tension among the characters, but it all got laid out at the beginning and there was nowhere for the story to go. This was so, in part, because the story consisted of one long scene in which all the characters were seated at the dining room table. But what if, I suggested, two of the characters left the table and went outside to smoke? What would get said in the presence of some people that wouldn't get said in the presence of others? By dividing the characters into different physical space, the writer invites confession, betrayal, the concealing and revealing of secrets. And secrets are essential in fiction. In fact, the discrepancy between what characters know is often the engine that drives a story forward.

Third, I tell my students to go through their stories and see how much of the important action takes place in the here and now and how much of it takes place in flashback. All too often, the great majority of action is taking place in flashback. Ask a writer to write about something that's happening now and she panics, but ask her to write about something that happened two years ago, and she has no problem. This is another way of being conflict-averse: you set the conflict before the story starts. Much of the flashback I see in student work could just as easily take place in the here and now, and if

enough of it can't, then perhaps the writer hasn't found the occasion for the telling and the story should really be set earlier. Flashback, after all, is supposed to illuminate the here and now, not the other way around.

Fourth, when I sit down to write I always ask myself the following questions: Who's my protagonist and who's my antagonist? What does my protagonist want? What does he think he wants (this is not necessarily the same thing as what he actually wants), and how is he setting out to achieve those wants? What these questions are concerned with is desire, which is the lifeblood of fiction. This is really the problem with a lot of watching stories. The only desire the character has is to be left alone: to be allowed to continue to watch. I'm often reminded of Nathaniel Hale's words: "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country." That's what we need in fiction—not patriotism per se, but the feeling that our characters would die for something. Because if our characters themselves aren't passionate, we can't expect our readers to be passionate about them.