

Novels for No One

1. The dilemma of "the reader"

When I'm teaching writing, I often talk about a mythical being called "the reader" as if we all know who that is. But while writing seven novels over the course of about twenty-five years, I've discovered that "the reader" is actually the name of a tangle of unknowns and problems that are maddeningly hard to resolve.

Who are the literal readers of my work that I can identify? My wife, other members of my family, friends, colleagues, some current or former students -- they all know me and presumably want to make some kind of helpful response, for which I thank them. From time to time I've sent manuscripts to editors or agents; some of them never responded at all, so they may not have read what I sent, but the rest did read at least some of it. Then there's myself, whoever that is, reading the work over in fluctuating moods and varying hopes and dreads.

But take all the responses of all the known, identifiable readers for what they're worth, and they still do not add up, by any calculus I know of, to that assumed but poorly understood being, "the reader": the stranger who, multiplied by an unknown number, constitutes a public. Far from me and unseen by me, "the reader" picks up my book (or, in recent years, downloads it from my website) and has some experience of it which I will never know. It is those stranger-readers who engage with the work of their own free will, and those readers alone, who can give the work a specific kind of validation and completion: they read not because they know me, not because it's their job (unlike an agent, editor, or reviewer), but because the work itself is somehow worth their time. Familiar, identifiable readers can never be "the reader," by definition; "the reader"'s reading happens elsewhere, over the horizon, secret from me. For many years I assumed that the act of writing novels somehow depended on these unknowable readers and their private experience of the words I set down. But I could never seem to define how it "somehow depended," and that's because the assumption was wrong.

I have had a decent number of stranger-readers. My novel *Family Resemblances* was published by Random House in 1986, and to the best of my

knowledge 20,000 copies of it were printed and sold, between hardback and paperback. It was never remaindered and no copies can be had except from used book dealers, which strongly suggests that at least 20,000 people read the book. Except for a handful of them who wrote to me, I know almost nothing about their response to the novel -- only what I can infer from the fact that it sold and it found its way onto a couple of school districts' summer reading lists.

What does the existence of those 20,000 stranger-readers prove about my book? That it tapped into the *Zeitgeist*, that as an artist I was in tune with the times? That it was a successful consumer product because it fulfilled genre expectations ("coming-of-age story," "young adult novel" -- neither of which I had any intention of writing)? That the cover art was attractive? That the Vintage Contemporary series sells well? I'd like to think that it was what Eudora Welty says reader and writer both want -- "a story of beauty and passion, some fresh approximation of human truth" -- but it seems to me that the book's having been read proves nothing of the kind.

It's not as if I learned much about how to write, or what to write, or what I had written, because those 20,000 people read my book. The book worked, but I'm not sure exactly what about it worked from anyone else's point of view; and since it's out of print and the publisher declined to reissue it (or buy the sequel), does that mean it didn't work after all, or does that mean something about the publishing business, entirely independent of my book or me?

"The reader" might be a different matter if I had become a regularly published novelist who goes on tour to promote his books and gives public readings. The response of an audience of strangers to one's words read aloud is like no other critique: there are passages where one seems to be leaning into the audience's full attention, bearing ahead on the sea of a collective awareness, and then there are passages where one seems to pitch impotent, empty words into a void. The pressure of attention vanishes, nothing is holding you up, and psychically you fall flat on your face. Anyone who has any business writing can't help but learn something from this experience about what works and what doesn't. But to say the least, one is not likely to round up such an audience without the help of consistent publication and marketing. No one has these at the beginning of a writing life; some, who nevertheless continue to make art, never do.

For whom am I writing novels, then, if "the reader" is precisely that reader with whom I have no relationship at all?

As I sit, moment by moment, in the act of writing fiction, on some barely conscious level the writing is a performance, and performance implies audience. If I were a choreographer and I went into the studio alone and improvised the beginnings of a dance, it would imply an audience. Writing these reflections on writing implies an audience (an endlessly patient one at that). An effort to communicate posits someone to communicate to, across a gap, not oneself in the mirror -- aye, there's the rub -- but again, "the reader" is by definition always

elsewhere. If someone in Spokane, Washington, takes *Family Resemblances* out of a library and reads it, how can it make any difference at all to me as I sit down to write in Prince Edward Island? I'll never know if that reader laughs or cries, if she sighs and reflects or throws the book across the room, much less what passage in the novel might have caused her to do so. I'll never receive from "the reader" the slightest confirmation of my artistic successes or admonition of my failures; no transaction between us is ever completed. What happens on the other side of the gap is unknown, but if writing is a performance there must be someone there, mustn't there?

That sounds logical, but it's not be the reality of the situation. The writer-reader relationship turns out to be an unrelationship, and it takes place, whether I like it or not, within me.

My colleague Doug Perry, in a piece on the notion of voice in writing, says that the writer and reader engage in an act of "mutual creation," and this is almost so but not quite. Creation is going on, but it isn't mutual. True, the writer is playing tennis with the reader and he uses the reader's presence across the net to create his writing self, but before anyone else sees a single word on a page, the writer is imagining that reader. From the git-go, he creates a reader to write to; he's playing tennis with his own creation. The kind of reader he creates has everything to do with the self that comes about in the act of writing. Such things can happen inside the fiction, too. In my novel *For Adam*, the narrator's son (Adam) has left home, apparently never to return, after delivering a tirade condemning Nick (the narrator) and Nick's whole generation; the book is written by Nick to Adam in the faint hope of bringing about a reconciliation. Nick creates for himself a reader-Adam who is angry, beloved, rejecting, absent, longed-for, and therefore the Nick who comes out on stage to tell the story is self-accusing and self-justifying, apologetic and defiant by turns.

Let me then think of some possible ways I could represent "the reader" to myself:

Create a reader who loves everything I write. Not a good idea because it means I can get away with any old crap.

Imagine as my reader the agent or editor who never bothers to respond, the hypothetical higher-ups and bean counters of publishing houses, the reviewers who write for the Sunday papers and the *New Yorker* and the *TLS*, the officers of foundations that give literary grants, the elite who write "100 Best" lists and decide who gets prizes. Result, paralysis.

Imagine as my reader all the other writers who are out there doing exactly the same things I am. Their response in my head is experts' talk of a kind that leaves

me restless and dissatisfied; shop talk doesn't bring me closer to my true motive for writing. But this dissatisfaction makes me remember what the motive is: the reader I want to reach is not professional but amateur, one who reads a book because sometimes what is found there makes all the difference. I cannot escape this inordinate ambition: to write that which will matter to someone.

Yet without knowing who "someone" is, how could I possibly know what will matter?

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2. I turn my back on "the reader," but not completely

In the course of gradually realizing that there is no communication with "the reader," I've also come to see that there is good reason to write a book that is not for "the reader": because then I have some hope of telling the truth. More and more I gravitate toward the sense that the presence of "the reader" must falsify, must cause me to prepare a face to meet the faces that I will never meet. The wish to please, to placate, at least not to offend too much, seems inescapable as long as "the reader" looms over my shoulder, and subliminally but crucially this wish to please stands between me and the page, preventing my hand from forming the words by which I will find out -- by which the characters will live out -- the truth of the story I'm writing. And if I don't get to that story-truth, why write in the first place?

If there is no transaction with "the reader," I could take the position that I write for myself alone – no more taking of advice, no more trying to get published or at least no more caring if I don't. No more trying to justify the act of writing. No more asking what the point of it is; remember what Auden said: "poetry makes nothing happen." Writing could become like a meditation: no more trying to cause any consequences, nothing but the doing itself.

This kind of writing is precisely not what I have taught for the past thirty-some years. Writing like this couldn't be taught in school; it can't be taught, period. How could any transaction accurately described as teaching not involve tailoring one's work for a reader? Writing in school, writing in groups is writing for the reader, by definition. It is instrumental, it has an effect, it is judged, it is responded to, the writer finds herself trying to please someone.

The school situation, the workshop situation, tells a subliminal lie (for benign motives, but a lie nevertheless) about the motive for art writing. The classroom, teacher-and-student situation teaches that your motive is to communicate, to please, to have a known effect. When you do so in school, you are rewarded in many ways. But since you cannot communicate with "the reader," or please "the reader," or have

a known effect on "the reader" (because you have no transaction with "the reader," ever), this motive only makes any kind of sense within the special situation of the classroom or writing group, where you know who your readers are, and it especially makes sense when you're focusing on whether you are managing to please the teacher.

Leave school and this motive doesn't work. Outside school, when you start imagining yourself in relation to a public, writing an art work to please, to communicate, or to have an effect, you are primed for bafflement and disappointment. Often you can't put your work before a public because you fail to please the gatekeepers, agents and editors, each of whose opinions represents only one individual, not "the reader." And even if you do get published and you do have a public, you still can't confirm that your effort to communicate has had any specific outcome. It's as though you've spent countless hours in your basement workshop inventing, building, and wrapping a unique, heartfelt, impossibly complex present. More than likely, when you bring the present upstairs, you encounter a series of people who don't want it: there is no one to give it to. And then when you do manage to give, and you think completion of the intended transaction is about to occur, you discover that you can't tell if anyone notices or values the aspects of the present into which you poured your heart and soul.

But having said that – which is accurate enough – I almost want to go back and delete it. A cloying scent of self-pity clings to that imagined scene. To react to the conditions of writing-as-art by feeling slighted and humiliated is ultimately a case of looking for love in the wrong place. Where there is no relationship to be had, there's no point in seeking one. And when none is forthcoming, no malice, neglect, or injustice is actually occurring; rather, *that which cannot respond is not responding*.

In the end, the only viable choice is to give up trying to make the story matter to "the reader." I can only guess at why a book is worth the time of a stranger-over-there who happens to value it; and when it is worth the stranger-reader's time, I don't know how, or if, that connects to what I did in the act of writing. The motives for art writing are not instrumental. When I trace the roots of these motives downwards, what I find is myself trying to use imagination and language to get at truths that probably I will never articulate well enough and that maybe nobody else wants to hear, and I find that this effort to get language to do what it cannot, to do what I cannot, is absolutely worthwhile and requires no justification beyond itself. I write because I write. I write to pour water on something that must be watered. I can't point to it, I can't name it, I just know it must be kept alive.

In *The Triggering Town*, Richard Hugo, American poet and teacher of poets, said "If you want to communicate, use the telephone." When I first read that, I thought he was being flippant, but maybe he was exactly right. If there is no communication in art writing, no transaction with "the reader," no back-and-forth, then one truly is writing novels for no one. But in further paradox, this "novel for no

one" may water that which is parched and dry inside someone else, without what could be called communicating.

In short, "the reader" is a fiction created by the writer; "the author" is a fiction created by the reader; the simultaneous existence of these two fictions gives rise to a third, that of communication between a writer and a public; but actually no such transaction is ever completed. And curiously, this is not a bad state of affairs.

In ceasing to write for "the reader," even in taking the position that one writes for oneself, one is not necessarily driven back upon writing to oneself alone. There is another alternative: readers are all around us, available twenty-four hours a day, sitting on shelves waiting to be opened. I've come to believe that the best readers for a writer to have may be other writers' books. A crucial audience for art exists in what has already been written.

At times when I write I am being read by familiar presences -- *A Room of One's Own*, let's say, or "June Recital," or *The Moviegoer*. Not that I'm competing with Woolf or Welty or Percy (out of the question), not that I could or would ever write what they write, but somehow I am, at certain moments, writing in the presence of their art work -- not their product, not their selves (unknowable to me), but the making of their work, the ethic, the conscience of it. It feels as if a writer far superior to me were silently writing at the next desk. And though he or she never glances up, never speaks, I feel that the words I'm writing are perfectly heard, my efforts at art seen through and understood; I'm held accountable for my choices good or bad, always tested, sometimes confirmed.

When my reader is other books, the relationship or unrelationship is precisely congruent with my situation as a writer. The mysterious business of watering without communicating is going on in the novels that I read and care about. I enter, from the reader's side, the same unrelationship that I create as I write; I receive it, I enter into it, I know that it works (for one reader); the read book becomes a part of my world. To the book I'm reading, when it is the right book, the necessary book, I can tell my story and my secrets; it already knows them. By this book I am known, accepted, forgiven – I might even use the word loved; I open the book, and like Helene Cixous, I "close the door on this world," I "strike the outside world with an equal blow." I can ask the right book any question. Whether it will answer, or after how many readings, or how obliquely, is never known until I ask. But this right book knows, along with my other secrets, what art work I am trying to commit, and has its opinions and its teachings about that, which come through at unexpected moments. Then I write not to "the reader," not to myself alone, not to agents and editors, not to other authors, not to my family, not to my colleagues and friends, but to art writing itself, to the awareness that is *in the books*.

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