

The trick of reading the right thing WHILE WRITING

Picking relevant material in the formative stages of your story can provide inspiration and information and push you in new directions

By Michael Backus

A FEW WEEKS INTO writing my first novel, I began to have second thoughts about the book I'd chosen to read while writing. *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace's

1,000-plus-page novel, was starting to produce unforeseen consequences. Neck problems for one, from carrying it on the subway. And more seriously, Wallace's run-on style and repeated footnoting was producing page-long sentences and parentheses (within parentheses (within parentheses)). I'd picked the book in the hope it would provoke the kind of literary ambition my own work sometimes lacked. And I liked it—I was 700 pages in and cruising.

But I had to put it aside. It was the wrong book at the wrong time.

Managing what you're reading while writing fiction can be one more tool a writer controls, a way to take your writing in directions you might not imagine were you not reading. I understand the argument that reading fiction while writing fiction is more distraction than benefit. Early in my career, my writing easily slipped into mimicry when reading a strong stylist.

But the more I wrote, the more I understood that it's information I get from reading, more than style or voice (though they're really inseparable): how an alcoholic mother treats her overweight daughter, the effect of the death of a beloved pet on a splintering family, what a living man says to a dying one at the scene of a car accident—basically how human beings interact with other human beings and the myriad ways writers invent to represent this behavior.

Reading how another writer conceptualizes universal experiences and emotions helps me understand there are many ways to approach character and invented behavior, to ellipsize time, reveal plot details, add humor, write dialogue.

It can be easy to develop tunnel vision as a writer. I see it in myself and I see it in my students: a tendency to describe every physical space from the same angle, every character with the same basic set of descriptive tools. Reading the perfect piece of fiction can show a writer a different approach, a way of thinking outside the box. Look at the following by Marilynne Robinson. I use this in my teaching because of the creative angle she takes in capturing the essence of a minor character. Students often find it expands their definition of what character description can be.

Bernice, who lived below us, was our only visitor. She had lavender lips and orange hair, and arched eyebrows each drawn in a single brown line, a contest between practice and palsy which sometimes ended at her ear. She was an old woman, but she managed to look like a young woman with a ravaging disease.

Even though *Infinite Jest* wasn't working for me, I remained determined to find the right book. I decided to try something I'd read before, *Already Dead* by Denis Johnson. I remembered it as a flawed book with stunning descriptions and outrageously creative similes, and that's what I felt I needed at the point when I was still discovering my novel's voice. And Johnson's writing had been good to me before. I often use a passage from his story "Car Crash While Hitchhiking" to tell students how reading can specifically inspire a writer without turning him into a plagiarist or mimic.

The man hanging out of the wrecked car was still alive as I passed, and I stopped, grown a little more used to the idea now of how really badly broken he was, and made sure there was nothing I could do. He was snoring loudly and rudely. His blood bubbled out of his mouth with every breath. He wouldn't be

taking many more. I knew that, but he didn't, and therefore I looked down into the great pity of a person's life on this earth. I don't mean that we all end up dead, that's not the great pity. I mean that he couldn't tell me what he was dreaming and I couldn't tell him what was real.

Johnson manages to create an entire world in the tension between "what he was dreaming" and "what was real," and shows me the world in a way I'd never considered. Two people on the threshold of the most basic life event and they're powerless to perceive the others' experience. There's simply no way for these two states of being, life and death, to coexist. Understanding is impossible, and there's great pity in that.

So how did this specifically motivate me? I first read this years ago when I was working on a short story about a 40-year-old man whose wife had recently died from cancer, and who had moved back to the house he grew up in. There were all kinds of tensions, chief among them that he'd married her because he couldn't think of a reason not to, and had she not gotten sick he surely would've divorced her by then. There was a spectral feeling to my story, even if it was never overt. But after I read the Johnson story, I realized I needed to flashback to some of their last moments together at exactly that time when life and death passed each other.

What emerged was a significant scene where the narrator, approaching a living character but believing it to be the ghost of his dead wife, has an imaginary conversation with her. Here's part of it:

He closed his eyes. What could he say to her? What would she say to him?
You never even liked me.
That's not fair.
Don't deny it, do you? You don't miss me.
I do.
You lie.
You know what I miss? I'll tell you. The way you'd lean into me sleeping, the way the backs of your legs and body would seek out the front of mine, the way we'd come together like the pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. It was ... perfect. Comforting.
Comforting? So you miss the comfort

of my body? What's next? How wonderfully I scrubbed the toilet bowl? How I folded your clothes after washing?

Come on, the Laundromat did our stuff, you never folded anything. And I cleaned the toilet more often than you did.

And you sure don't know how to go with a moment.

—from "Pumpkinhead," an unpublished short story

What I wrote had nothing to do with Johnson's paragraph. My scene didn't even end up being a "great pity" moment, though I had started with that in mind. But had I not read Johnson's story, this scene wouldn't exist at all.

All well and good in the abstract, except *Already Dead* wasn't working either. As complex and far-ranging as Wallace's prose style could be, it never intimidated me. But Johnson's use of language—his similes and metaphors, how he described the natural world—was so beyond me and so like what I aspired to, I found myself saying, "If I can't write a line/phrase/paragraph that beautiful, why even bother?" I had to put a second book down.

Maybe I was being too casual in my choosing, picking books with literary cachet that actually had very little to do with mine. I'd known of Mona Simpson's *Anywhere but Here* for years; it had a solid reputation and there was a commonality. Her novel was about the volatile relationship between mother and daughter; mine was at least partly the story of a man who had abandoned his daughter eight years before and found himself back in touch. I wasn't sure how

much of the father-daughter relationship would be on paper. I was initially intrigued by the task of writing about a good man with a dark past who at the end makes a morally justifiable decision not to be a part of his daughter's life.

But the Simpson book was nothing but parent-child interactions and I found myself writing one father-daughter scene, then another and another, and slowly my book became less about an emotionally isolated man finding his way back from the void and more about an estranged father and daughter delicately picking their ways to a relationship. And when I finished the first draft, I came to understand this was the only direction my story could've gone. Once I created the abandoned daughter, she became the gun on the mantel and I had to fully integrate her. Maybe I would've come to a similar place without Simpson, but I sure wouldn't have the father-daughter dynamic I have now.

I don't mean to oversell this. It usually takes years to write a novel and I'm not suggesting you "manage" your reading every step. That's not practical. But there are key moments in writing—when you're finding the voice, when you're creating the characterizations, when you've hit a structural impasse

There are key moments in the writing of any work of fiction ... where it's particularly important to be reading the right thing.

and are unsure what's next—where it's particularly important to be reading the right thing at the right time.

The key is to be ruthless just as you are with your writing. Step back and look at what you're reading. Is it having a positive effect on your writing? If not, try another book. And once you find the right book, slow down. Take your time. Your writing will be better for it.

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