Writing About Writing

(While Dodging Mushrooms and Plot Holes)

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Writing is like discovering puzzle pieces from five different boxes, flinging them into a sack, and hoping they don't fight each other overnight. Some arrive during inconvenient moments—mid-shower, mid-dream, mid-sentence—and vanish before you can save them. Some don't belong to the same story. Some mutter to themselves as they crawl out and haunt your spouse's REM cycles.

Occasionally, two pieces that shouldn't connect lock together anyway and spark something new. Those are the gifts. But most of the time, the pieces demand attention, throw tantrums, or refuse to play fair. The tyranny of too many ideas can feel like walking into a mushroom field after a drought. They bloom at once—gorgeous, temporary, hallucinatory—and then rot before you can harvest them.

We talk too much about "writer's block" and not enough about *graphorrhea*—that cursed gushing of unfiltered words and half-formed brilliance. Kaopectate for the page might be nice, but until then, we just keep writing, editing, pruning, mourning, and rewriting.

Too many people wait until their fingers are arthritic and their voices are shaky to try capturing the memories that only they hold. They should start sooner—record their stories, pay someone to transcribe them, gift a memory to the great-grandkids who won't know their faces but might know their laughter.

In the beginning, writing feels like play. A few paragraphs align like the border of a jigsaw puzzle. Later, the middle sags. Whole sections vanish. Did they ever exist? Tech and science writing have the advantage of scaffolding—facts, figures, footnotes—but fiction is slipperier. You shape it like wet soap and hope it holds its form.

Some writers choose a trope and cling to it like a life raft. Others get swarmed and stung by too many clever phrases. Beginners pile their story-sack high with orphaned plot bunnies, haunted metaphors, and scenes that don't belong in the same century. They need a bulldozer, not an editor.

Eventually, they throw out the ugly babies. The adored-but-unusable paragraphs. The duel of prepositional phrases that would make an ESL instructor cry. They sand off the rough edges and mourn every deleted darling. And that's when the real work begins.

This is also when many give up.

The ego takes its bruises here. Writers either grow up or walk away. They fill plot holes with tasteless putty, or worse—glow-in-the-dark silly putty that screams "Look at me!" without saying anything.

The trick is making it organized *enough* that the reader can enjoy the ride. Great writers—Vonnegut, Tolkien—sometimes point to the holes and wink. Others make the holes the point.

My seventh-grade teacher said there were only seven types of stories. I remember none of them, but he taught me plenty. The hundreds of cowboy movies I saw taught me there were more and they were all overused with poor dialog. The west was gritty and dirty. Those horses tied in front of the saloon didn't wait until they got back to barn to go to the bathroom. The frontier was hard in so many ways that these stories never told. *Unforgiven* and *Godless* were closer to the truth, there are others McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* and *The Last Picture Show* are worthy tales for authors to examine. In the seventh, grade I began realizing that the classic cowboy movie ending where the hero choses the horse over the saved maiden was just wrong.

I've long admired Hemingway, who never sent you to the dictionary. He told you what he wanted you to know. Twain too, but better. Tolkien, a wordy wizard, built worlds that swallowed readers whole. One girlfriend vanished into his books for a week. She returned like Oliver Twist: hungry for more.

Vonnegut and Orwell force you to see what you'd rather ignore. Poe birthed a style that's been copied into boredom. King, when he's good, is brilliant—a campfire prophet with a typewriter.

And Donaldson? The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant tossed me into the dictionary twice a page. I loved the world he built, loved then hated the protagonist, but couldn't look away. He made me *feel*. That matters more than bestseller status.

I am, in an uncredited way, a successful author. I helped write the manuals for million-dollar machines now resting in the ***Museum of Forgotten Tech***. Back then, the tech writer role hadn't evolved. We were coders. Programmers. Hackers of logic. And when someone had to explain the damn thing, one of us got drafted. Often, it was me.

The manuals were often shrink-wrapped and never read. That stings more than a bad review, but it is a battle of sorts. We were the only experts; there was no one to ask if we couldn't get that new minicomputer to work. We earned our spurs working on faulty electronics running buggy code. Success without opening the manual was like the old west teamsters never having to ask another driver for help. An acronym that came later as more end users needing help would call the computer center and ask only to be rebuffed by RTFM, Read The Fine Manual, the word wasn't **fine**. Help desks have evolved, programmers not so much.

So, I developed my own method back then—bits and phrases, scribbled half-thoughts, bagged and tagged for later. Let them ferment, mildew, grow literary mushrooms. Come back in a week and see if they stink or sparkle.

It works quite well today.

It's not a science. It's barely a craft. It's mushroom farming in a bag of puzzle pieces. But it's mine.

And I write it down because some stories shouldn't die shrink-wrapped.