

Why Not Put Off Till Tomorrow the Novel You Could Begin Today?

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My life is a series of ranked priorities. At the top of the list is the thing I do not wish to do the very most, and beneath that is everything else. There is vague order to the everything else, but it scarcely matters. The thing I really don't want to do is start my fifth novel, and the rest of my life is little more than a series of stalling techniques to help me achieve my goal.

This essay, for example, which I asked to write because all of the other essays I have thought of are now finished, will easily kill a day. I have already restored my oven to the level of showroom-floor cleanliness, written a small hill of thank-you notes (some of them completely indiscriminate: "Thank you for sending me the list of typographical errors you found in my last novel"), walked the dog to the point of the dog's collapse. I've read most of the books I've been meaning to read since high school.

The sad part is, when there is something I very much don't want to do, I become incredibly fast about shooting through everything else. This week I have cleaned out my sister's closets. And then my mother's.

For a long time before I start to write a novel, anywhere from one year to two, I make it up. This is the happiest time I have with my books. The novel in my imagination travels with me like a small lavender moth making loopy circles around my head. It is a truly gorgeous thing, its unpredictable flight patterns, the amethyst light on its wings. I think of my characters as I wander through the grocery store. I write out their names like a teenage girl dreaming of marriage.

In these early pre-text days my story has more promise, more beauty, than I have ever seen in any novel ever written, because, sadly, this novel is not written. Then the time comes when I have to begin to translate ideas into words, a process akin to reaching into the air, grabbing my little friend (crushing its wings slightly in my thick hand), holding it down on a cork board and running it though with a pin. It is there that the lovely thing in my head dies.

I take some comfort that I've done this before, that eventually, perhaps even today, I will write the opening pages. Somewhere around Page 80 I will accept that I am neither smart enough nor talented enough to put all the light and movement and beauty I had hoped for onto paper, and so I will

have to settle for what I am capable of pulling off. But the question then becomes: On what day do you do format a new file on the computer and type that first sentence? I don't actually sell the book until I've finished writing it, so I don't have a deadline to compel me. And if I'm careful with the money I've got, it could last me for a while.

Suddenly, five novels seems ungainly. The thought of it convinces me how boring I've become, and I start to wonder why I never went to medical school. I imagine Elizabeth Taylor choosing a dress in which to marry Richard Burton. Did she believe that this time everything would be different? That this time she would be true until death did them part? I marvel at such hopefulness.

Starting a novel isn't so different from starting a marriage. The dreams you pin on these people are enormous. You are diving into the lives of your characters, knowing that you will fall in love with all of them, knowing (as surely Elizabeth Taylor knew) that in the end the love will finish and turn you out on the street alone.

From the vantage point of a novelist trying to get inside the novel, it makes the most sense to me to shoot for something along the lines of "A Man Without Qualities" or "Remembrance of Things Past," a genuine tome that will keep me busy for the next 30 years or so. But that doesn't work either, because as soon as I'm comfortably inside my book I inevitably long to get out. The farther into the story I get, the harder and faster I write. In short, I become a malcontent dog, either scratching to get in or scratching to get out.

It should be noted that there are two blissful things about writing novels: making them up and seeing them finished. The days I spend in either of these two states are so sweet, they easily make the rest of the process bearable. The novel in my head is all mapped out and ready to go, but in these final minutes before departure I feel the rocking waves of doubt.

In trying to start a novel, I dream about the novels I wish I had written, the ideas I should have had. A book about a boy in a boat with a Bengal tiger? Surely I would have come up with that one had Yann Martel not written "Life of Pi." Surely with a little more time I would have come up with something as important and beautiful as Carol Shields's "Unless." And yet, the books I most long to plagiarize are my own.

Every time I start a new novel, I think what a comfort it would be to crawl back into the broken-in softness of the old one. Would it be completely unreasonable to write another book about opera and South America? Would reviewers say I was in a rut? Honestly, how often do reviewers actually read the preceding novels? Of course when I was starting "Bel Canto," I was longing for just one more book about a gay magician, and so on, backward.

Despite the hand wringing, housekeeping and the overdrive of unnecessary productivity, there will come a point very soon when I will begin, if for no other reason than the stress of not beginning will finally overwhelm me. That, and I'll want to see how the whole thing ends. Sometimes if there's a book you really want to read, you have to write it yourself.