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Writer Seeking Emotional Rescue; An Interview With Safe House Author

by [Jill_Dearman](#)

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Being a writer means being in an ever-shifting state of anxiety and self-contradiction. How could it not be? Recently, for this "Writer to Writer" column I spoke with Burton Shulman, author of the haunting short story collection,



Safe House. I think of Burt as being very much a writer's writer. Human, open, full of life and always working on the craft.

JD: How has your writing practice evolved over the years?

BS: I've become a serious mindfulness meditator (six years and counting) ... although I hope I've also hung on to my goofball roots.

JD: Burt, I sincerely think you have! I know we are both admirers of Sharon Salzberg's teachings on mindfulness.

BS: Yes, I think mindfulness has helped me become a lot more forgiving of my first drafts; now I try to blow through them quick as I can (which still isn't all that quick). Since I feel less anxiety as I write, it's easier for me to allow my curiosity to take the wheel, rather than my pre-conceptions. The question "Can I be a 'great' writer?" used to completely obsess me, and is now mostly gone because I've come to see it as grandiose, irrelevant and potentially very destructive. The same is true for other, equally extraneous obsessions -- "Will this get published? By whom?" and even "Is this any good?". These have been replaced or at least matched in intensity, by truly interesting questions like "What's at the heart of this story?" "Where's the real energy in it for me as a writer?" and maybe "What would interest me in it most as a reader?" As for later drafts, I've become much more focused on finishing stories, though alas still not on finishing them quickly. I'm resigned to the reality that I will always be willing to devote however much time it takes to wring everything I can out of a story. And for me that usually means years, not weeks or even months. On the other hand, I'm in a transitional time right now, and the writing does seem to be coming more quickly. If the resulting stories turn out well I'll be a lot happier (not to mention more prolific). But I'm not holding my breath.

JD: Is there one thing in particular that stops you up, throws you off course with the writing? Or can you choose one thing to say a bit about?

BS: Having said all of the above -- feeling less anxiety, worrying less about extraneous questions, etc. -- I shall now contradict myself completely. My real point above was that I feel less of all that now than in the past. So -- the following three things still throw me face-down into the weeds: 1) reading about publicly successful writers can induce a corrosive envy that may begin as a subterranean twinge or longing, but almost invariably ends up doing very nasty things to my mind-state, my self-confidence, and my patience; 2) beating myself up about how amateurish and unfocused my early drafts almost always are, how slow I am to revise and rework them, and the fact that the big-time publications have never been very

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interested in my stories can cause me a lot of pointless pain – and underscore my lifelong bewilderment about why I seem to be fairly smart in some areas of my life, but very stupid when it comes to writing stories, which is of course the activity I most love (and hate) to do); 3) the relentless pressure of money-making work and other responsibilities, can impinge from all sides on my writing time – which can have a not-so-subtle effect on my belief in myself as a "real" writer. Though as to that, I once heard a definition of a "real" writer as someone who really writes. And I like that.

JD: Me too. So, when you were putting your story collection together, how did you choose which ones to include/leave out? How did you come up with the order?

BS: It was pretty clear to me that after many years of revision I finally had a group of stories that, to my reader's (and writer's) eye and ear, worked on some level -- though not all of them equally well. I was also sure that I'd taken each of them as far as I could. My ultimate goal has long been to create stories that are as solid and tough as a well-made piece of furniture; built to last, with every part working as well as it can within the overall design and "function" of that particular piece. While I didn't feel I'd achieved that, I did feel I'd come as close I was able to – and a publisher was telling me she wanted to publish them. At the same time, it was equally clear to me that most of my other stories were either unfinished or simply not working at all. The group I chose (with my publisher's help) was also thematically consistent -- arguably too consistent, but never mind -- and they seemed to play off each other pretty well. I'd recently read a book of deliberately related stories by David Huddle called



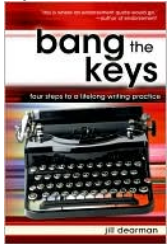
Only the Little Bone and loved it, and though mine weren't deliberately related I saw Huddle's book as a kind of distant model. As for the order, for me that was a pretty superficial (crass?) process: I put my favorites up front -- the first two, which, not coincidentally, were also the most recent, because I was a complete unknown and wanted to take my best shot at pulling in readers and reviewers right away. The book is so non-commercial that I felt it needed to hook readers from the first page if it had any chance of gaining some public attention. The order of the other seven just felt intuitively right, with the last story ending on a note that I felt was a kind of summing up of everything I'd been writing to that point.

As an excruciatingly slow finisher, the book felt a little like a valedictory.

JD: Thanks, Burt! So what about you out there in the blogosphere? Any contradictions or paradoxes in your life as a writer, in your writing practice?

Do tell!

And for more writerly insights, visit the salon at <http://www.bangthekeys.com>, and check out my new book,



Bang the Keys

This blog is still evolving. If you are interested in being interviewed, drop me a line at Jill@JillDearman.com. And finally, Happy 4th of July!

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by [oiloncanvas](#) on 07-02-2009 10:15 AM

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jill dearman is my emotional rescuer. 'real' writers are writers who really write--i like this...

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by [BLOGGER Jill_Dearman](#) on 07-02-2009 12:50 PM

Options

thanks, Oil! And also who re-write, and re-write ... (then finish of course)!

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by [Shotmonster](#) on 07-02-2009 08:58 PM

Options

This is a great interview that gets to the heart of issues I think every writer goes can understand. I think at some point you have to let go, let the dreams of fame and fortune take a back seat to the love of writing. Jealousy of successful writers is a useless waste of time, but still something that I think eats at all of us.

Cudos to Burton for not giving up and getting his work out there to the world.

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by [BurtShulman](#) on 07-05-2009 06:22 PM

Options

Well, just to jump-start discussion a bit I thought I'd copy in here an e-mail from my pal, Robert Crooke, a very fine novelist and a good friend (check out his "American Family" and "Sunrise" here on barnesandnoble.com. He gave me permission to quote him here, so here's what he said first:

Hey Burt,

Great conversation about my favorite subject--creative writing. I found your comments very relatable, with some slight variations. Though I once had that occasional twinge of writer's envy you cite, upon encountering the public success of other literary fiction writers, I have more or less succeeded in turning that impulse toward outer appreciation and inner motivation. Competition and competitiveness are human diseases, I have come to find--maybe particularly American diseases in some way.

Frankly, 99% of what I see published as fiction, even literary fiction, leaves me so cold, and is so derivative, imitative, and formulaic, that none of it impresses me anyway. The point is, if I had written those sorts of things to be published, I would not have felt successful anyway. There is still that other 1%, of course, which includes great established writers [some of their work, not all!], and some interesting new writers--including you, btw. Encountering these people, I say to myself, well, yes, that deserved to be published. Bravo! And so, my vanity is spared by a little generosity, and I move on, and get back to work.

I find I have little problem with writer's block, or with feelings of inadequacy around early drafts, since I am committed to writing for the rest of my life, and have found that--for me at least--the writing of specific pieces or my writing ability in general only improve with repetition. Many drafts later, I am far more satisfied. Many writers have said that one only knows what needs to be said about a story, a character, a place, a mood, by writing it. Writing is discovery. It's an act of love, of faith, of art. That is what makes it a life's work. For me. And not an act of success. Frankly, I've enough experience of hundreds of readers for my two prior novels to have discovered what that feels like anyway. What more is needed on that side of the ledger? Would thousands of readers, instead of hundreds, mean anything more significantly on the issue of art? I doubt it.

Now, I fully understand that most people, including many writers, I assume, don't think in this spiritual way about writing. But I do not care.

All best,
Bob



by [BurtShulman](#) on 07-05-2009 06:26 PM

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Bob went on to discuss writer's programs; we had a bit of a back-and-forth:

One last, related thought, Burt: perhaps you saw that recent article by Louis Menand in The New Yorker, about the history and development of university creative writing programs in the US, and whether they do or don't produce writers of fiction who wouldn't have found some other way to the public?

It's an interesting piece that raises some worthy points. It mentions a number of the great fiction writers who have emerged in the past 30 years or so, some of whom were helped by being in creative writing programs, but few of whom actually emerged with degrees. There were many others who never entered such programs. Interestingly, almost all of them have taught at such programs, which is another matter entirely. The article made the point--accurately, I think--that what is largely produced in those MFA programs are teachers of creative writing or literature. Not writers, really.

I came away from the article feeling that once again, it may be that writers learn by writing mainly. I'm sure it's always good to meet other writers and be encouraged by them, if they are willing to be encouraging, if they have the ability to see your writing rather than their own.

I do think, though, that one downside to the "academization" of creative writing into MFA programs has been the quantification of creativity and especially style. Just as in a math class or a history class, students come to understand that X equals Y, or that certain events took place on specific dates in time, and that academic qualifications in those subject areas demand being able to parrot back certain specific things, I have the sense that a delusion has occurred wherein it is thought that good fiction writing looks and feels a certain way. Even if the voice or story may differ, the writing itself must show a series of pre-agreed elements around style and approach, or else the writing is considered not good. I think publishers and agents now think this way. And this is one big reason why so much of what does get published seems so similar, so derivative of what is already published. It is why so many new writers of literary fiction seem--to me anyway--more or less the same, the same emotional reactions, the same forms of humor, the same presumptions about human nature, etc.

This all, in my view, mitigates even more against a writer who dares to be truly unique.



by [BurtShulman](#) on 07-05-2009 06:30 PM

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And I replied to Bob:

Great points but I don't entirely agree. Great programs aren't formulaic. Great teachers encourage each writer's own exploration. Question: how do you view Strunk and White (Elements of Style)? Helpful or pedantic?

And what about critics through the centuries? Most despised Moby Dick when it came out. That depressed Melville more than any writing program could. My view is we may actually be in a kind of golden age. Tons of mediocrity (though the mediocre have rights too and who decides they're mediocre?) but lots of brilliance as well. I think writing programs teach competence, and personally I think that's fine. Talent and/or genius is the writer's job anyway, right? Take your pick: Melville or Tolstoy or Shakespeare or Faulkner or Hemingway or KA Porter or Fitzgerald or Alice Munro or Denis Johnson or Bob Crooke or Chekov or Steinbeck or Welty or Doctorow or Roth or Bellow or Marquez or Borges or Joyce or Becket or some newer writers I rarely read out of naked envy -- and put any of them in writing programs. I believe they'd have burst the bounds and written their hearts out anyway.

And if they had truly good teachers they would only (mostly) been given the help they asked for, plus appreciative audiences. Like I said, you learn competence in programs -- but you also learn to be a better reader of yourself and others, which is practical and useful. I had some brutal workshop sessions and I kept going (also had some lovely ones). Melville and Hardy had some

brutal reviews and stopped writing fiction. Pick your poison -- but on balance I don't think good writing programs teach homogeneity at all; not in my experience. I think that's kind of a myth. Writers usually start by imitating the writing they love or the writing they find they're able to imitate. Some find they have their own voice and have a powerful contribution to make to the culture; some don't. Most of us ride the spectrum in between. But I think writing programs help; if we don't like the writing let's blame the writer not the M.F.A. Program!

Fondly,
Burt

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by [BurtShulman](#) on 07-05-2009 06:34 PM

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Finally, Bob responded:

Yes, I mainly agree with what you say here. I probably did give the impression in my prior note that MFA-type programs had no value. That is not true. they do have value, some of which you cite correctly, and also, as the article pointed out, they have also developed an educated audience for literary fiction, even if it is a narrow one [and even if, in my opinion, its narrowness shows in its tastes].

I agree on the issue of competence being taught. But again, in my experience, there are many different types of literary competence. It isn't a zero-sum type situation. On your question about Strunk & White, I would answer both: helpful and pedantic both! I'm not the only writer who would say that either.

There certainly are great teachers, and most really excellent fiction writers have had a great teacher or mentor or editor in their lives. That kind of oversight is very important. I'm just saying the classroom, education, MFA format [as well as the writers group format] has as many flaws as virtues, and self-directed fiction writers sooner or later start to understand that they must take great pains about who they let criticize their stuff. There are just too many people, writers and readers, well educated, well read, who still confuse personal taste and expectation with quality.

...and as you know, in most cases of the great writers you mentioned below, in almost all cases, their greatest works were also their greatest failures, in the eyes of their readers, and even critics in some cases, though since critics are really just readers also, it's not difficult to see why.

In the cases of Melville and Fitzgerald certainly, they had developed wide popular audiences with competent, well written but in some way facile books and stories, and when they presented something truly experimental, awe inspiring, their audience turned up its nose. Moby Dick unfortunately was so experimental that even critics hated it, but it lives now in the era of modernism and post modernism where it belongs. Gatsby was actually a critical favorite, but sales were disappointing [around 25,000 copies or so], which is actually good in my view, but it was far less than his first 2 novels sold. An experimental book like Tender is the Night fared even worse.

The example goes on and on. Hemingway's best work was done in the 1920s, when he was an avant garde artist, known by critics. As he grew in popularity, his books became weaker and weaker stuff. It's an old story as we know. And actually in many cases, the best works by the best writers are less well accepted in their own time than in latter days, when more objectivity is available to readers.

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by [BurtShulman](#) on 07-05-2009 06:41 PM

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Sorry folks, one more comment from The Talented Mr. Crooke (sorry for all this, but I'm hoping it stimulates some discussion, as noted above:

As you well know, Burt, the world of publishing is a world of its own, based on many uncertain truths and guesswork, masquerading as aesthetic judgment, and mainly for the purposes of serving a commercial market. I agree with your insights about the "commercial effect" even on

literary fiction. You commented on how you found certain expectations of yourself hiding behind this facade of artistic concern. I have too, in my case. I'm sure all writers deal with this. Most importantly, though, I detect the same confusion of motives among readers, even faithful readers of literary or "quality" fiction.

I have come to understand that many readers--even those kinds of readers [and even a number of writers actually] don't really have a sure and confident sense of literary taste. They are not really sure of what is "good." They rely on the judgments and recommendations of others, in the media, academe, the literary establishment, and sometimes their friends, to confer the permission almost to appreciate certain literary works, and to ignore others.

This sense of group-think, audience self-identification, is also an aspect of commercialization, I think, because it creates a sense that writers are serving a "customer base." And that customer base better be happy, better be pleased with your narrator, your story, its outcome, your general sense of human nature, etc.

This is why so much fiction is so phony. Why so many novels that even deal with horrible acts or truths about man and his utter narcissism, selfishness, and viciousness, end up working out all right in some fashion by the end, and hence become what I would call phony. [Dare I cite *The Kite Runner* as one typical example of what I mean?] Phony as to life the way it really is. More an entertainment than anything else.

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by **KathyS** on 07-05-2009 10:27 PM

Options

Burt, thank you for your entries. So much thought into this discussion, I've enjoyed the insights of both you, and Mr. Crooke.

You both talk about classroom/and/or non academic influences on writing...this makes an enormous amount of sense. I identify with this, through years of classroom experience, as a student of art. There are teachers, and there are teachers. And, I've seen...There are students who have "it", before they even enter a classroom.

Some teachers can't see beyond the edge of a canvas...no creative drive, no creative initiative is carried to, and into their students...if a student is given to their own abilities, the lack of drive by a teacher will always carry over to their students. They can be shown the canvas, and the point by point application of paint, but if a student isn't shown that there is more than just application, and edges, another world out there, a student's drive can be stifled.

I'm not a student of writing, but it's in the same league as any art...it's all personal creativeness that shows through, in the end.

I also see that we live in a 'pop' society..."what can I create, that will "wow", that hasn't been said before?" I know the feeling; I feel the feeling, of being an individual. The pressures...the avoidance of them, etc. I'm a cynic and my own worst enemy. And yes, what makes my individuality special? I don't know. Maybe because I say I am? But, there's a critic in all of us. Who is right, and who is wrong? And, as you've said, we are all readers. What makes you more special than me? Just questions that can't be avoided.

Thanks, again,
Kathy

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