

Whitehall to Wood Thrush:

Adapting a Novel From Real Life

When I teach my “Writing Autobiographical Fiction” class, I make sure right away that students understand the difference between writing autobiographical fiction (ABF) vs. autobiography or memoir. I totally agree with Robin Hemley, who, in his excellent *Turning Life Into Fiction*, preaches TRANSFORMATION. It certainly is not as simple as transcribing a real-life event to the page with a few embellishments. If you can find Hemley’s book (it’s currently out-of-print), he has wonderful chapters on everything from transforming characters to settings to plots and themes, along with loads of excellent exercises. What I want to discuss, however, is the process of writing my novel *The Measure of Everything* (Plain View Press, 2005) based on a real-life event, hoping that you, the reader, might find your inspiration to do so as well.

They say everybody has at least one book in them—could it be that yours might be an event you already lived, not something totally imagined? I’d like to say that the process of writing out of your own life is easier, but it may, in fact, be harder due to the transformation your story will need to undergo if it’s to mean all that it can for the reader. And what sort of transformations are these?

First, **Transformations of Character**: who will tell your story? Right away, I decided my book, about the struggle I participated in during the winter of 1999 to prevent the commercial development of a 1,000-acre farm outside Yellow Springs, Ohio, wasn’t going to be about *me*. No college professor like me living across the street from an active farm. No part-time protestor who gave some money and time to keep his neighbors tilling the soil instead of manning the tills at another misplaced Wal-Mart Superstore. I wanted characters distant from me—and I didn’t intend to use any of the real-life heroes involved in Whitehall Farm fight. There are dangers of basing ABF on real people: your friends and loved ones will almost never like the way you’ve portrayed them, no matter how sympathetically, and you could even wind up losing friends, even gaining an enemy. Is art worth that? Many have thought so, but I didn’t want to chance it. I value too much living in peace with my fellow villagers.

As it is, I found a group of characters to tell the story and carry the considerable amount of plot—or they found me, which is the way I like it. Sitting in Dino’s Cappuccinos the spring after our real farm fight (which, by the way, resulted in the local land trust’s partnering with two lawyers who lived on the farm to purchase the whole shebang for \$3.75 million), I saw in my mind’s eye a fortyish woman with long blonde hair sitting in a coffeeshop, darker and wintrier than the sun-lit ambience of Dino’s in May. I knew she was on the run from a bad marriage and had a young son. All would be revealed, if I simply gave her time to reveal her secrets. Elizabeth (“Seth”) Abel would be my point of view character who, while eavesdropping, would find out what the farm fight was all about, and would be gradually, against her better instincts, drawn in.

Alas, it was not to be. I wrote more than one draft with Seth as the major POV character, but it never seemed to quite work. For one thing, she was less mysterious,

since, as POV, she told us all her secrets. Secondly, and more problematic, the major townie character, Billy Acorn, on whom much of the plot would turn, was rather unsympathetic in his blatant attempts to bed Seth. Or so many early readers, both male and female, told me.

Three years and several drafts into writing the book, I changed the POV to Billy, and all came together pretty nicely—but not as nicely as when, after Plain View Press publisher Susan Bright had accepted the manuscript, she casually suggested I restructure, beginning with Billy in West Virginia (since she found that part some of the best stuff). It was a bombshell—one of those suggestions that, while requiring a mountain of work from the writer, resonates in the middle of the chest. It took me a summer to do it, but I'm very satisfied with the result, and I believe the reader will be, too. As the chapters alternate between the West Virginia present and Ohio immediate past, not only is Billy's character unveiled more sympathetically, but the two land battles parallel and expand the story as well as the theme: urban sprawl is happening everywhere—and it's devastating.

And there were other advantages of adopting Billy as POV. Like me, he loves classic rock, especially Neil Young; is something of an orphan; and is at a crossroads in his life. I was there once: remain in West Virginia as an over-educated shoe salesman or tackle graduate school—and I suspect most readers can relate. Unlike me (I hope!), Billy is a relentless womanizer and avoids a full-time job at all costs.

Transformation of Setting was an issue, too. On the one hand, I wanted the wonderful town of Yellow Springs, Ohio to recognize itself—and had no doubt it would—but, on the other hand, wanted to avoid stereotyping its denizens, perhaps even angering those whom I most wanted to praise. So I created fictional Shawnee Springs, which, like Yellow Springs, has a history of healing springs and political liberalism, an avant garde liberal arts college (Burk vs. the real Antioch), a wonderful nature preserve (Glenora Wood vs. Glen Helen), and even a tavern which is the oldest building in town (the Trout vs. Trail Tavern). And of course the farm: the very real Whitehall vs. the fictional Wood Thrush. It was quite convenient to borrow geography, culture and commerce with very little change (Oldham's vs. Young's Dairy, the Bean Tree vs. the Emporium), but if the name changes seem of little significance to a reader, they're of major significance to me. They mean that the Shawnee Springs of *my* imagination is *not* the very real Yellow Springs of everyone else's experience. I don't expect that distinction to get me off the hook with everyone in my hometown (or even anyone, for that matter), but it makes *me* feel a whole lot better. Shawnee Springs is not Yellow Springs; it can't be; it's one man's very peculiar, individualistic take on the tiny town he dearly loves. My take is eccentric, unique and I guarantee it won't be the same as anyone else's who's experienced this funky, magical place somewhere between Boulder and Bilbo Baggins' Middle-Earth.

But I did borrow the real fight to save Whitehall Farm with only a few really important differences, all of them made because of the dramatic necessity of the novel (and a novel *does* tell you what it needs and doesn't need, if you listen closely). I borrowed the plot—the public struggle—almost whole-cloth from life, based on my participation and from the resulting newspaper accounts. Thus, while the book dramatizes plenty of behind-the-scenes political machinations, seductions, plots and counter-plots, revelations and epiphanies, the *public* scenes parallel exactly the actions our town took: protests, rallies, meetings, benefit concert, flea market and finally a

public auction at the Holiday Inn in a nearby city. It was fun to compose scenes which I'd witnessed from memory: often dramatic, *life-changing* (for me) events, a couple of which, I confess, I still can't read without weeping; but it was also a huge responsibility to "get it right," not in exact detail but in the spirit of what happened. Readers who were present as well as those who weren't may judge me harshly on this point, for events must ring true. The latter group might judge me most harshly, since the conclusion of the fight to save Whitehall was, all agree, miraculous.

Perhaps, most importantly, it's the novelist's job to provide as much perspective as possible to let readers judge for themselves. The theme of landscape, both inner and outer, was inescapable as I wrote about these events. Very flawed people were making decisions about who they were in the middle of the struggle of their lives. And as they did, they were asking the reader to answer the question: Who or what *is* the measure of everything, really, and why is that question important? The way each individual answers might be the most important of all in regards to the continuance of our planet, our species. And it determines a lot of things in our daily lives, such as what kind of vehicle we buy and how much we use it and for what kinds of activities; how much trouble we'll go to in order to recycle, and what kinds of food we'll buy and eat. It's no exaggeration to say that since beginning this project, I've come to question almost every resource I use. That's a real gift. Writing from real life is humbling, it's a risk and it's a responsibility, yet it's a very big thrill to share events, from small and private to huge and public, that turned your world upside down.