

“The Best Brandy”:

The Appalachian Writer’s Authentic Voice

It’s something of a cliché—“when will I find my writer’s voice?”—but I hope to find something genuine, if not new, to say about this slippery concept. At any rate, I’ll try to say something about what I think a writer’s voice consists of—especially an Appalachian writer—why it’s so important, what you can do to find your voice and what some of its essential components are. It’s a good excuse to talk about many of the things that are important to a writer, especially to a fiction writer, although I believe that most of what I have to say applies equally well to nonfiction and maybe even poetry—but you be the judge. Also, I’m thinking of realistic literary fiction as opposed to genre fiction.

Let me say first what it’s not. I don’t mean a *character’s* or a *narrator’s* voice. We all recognize that when we hear it—the distinctive way Huck Finn, Jay Gatsby or Scout Finch speak—the accents, attitudes and socioeconomics that are revealed when they open their mouths. By voice, I mean the way the *author* sounds throughout all his/her work, which includes, but is not limited to, his/her characters’ voices. It’s the underlying voice, the one you often have to read between the lines to hear; it’s the big strand woven from many smaller strands. Sometimes it nearly bashes us over the head,

it's so loud; at others, it's like one of those high-pitched whistles only dogs can hear.

Most writers fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

So what are some of those strands a writer's voice is woven from?

First, a writer's voice consists of the words he/she habitually chooses—big or small, Latinate-fancy or Anglo-Saxon-plain, as well as the way writers tend to write their sentences—long or short; straight-to-the-point declarative or slow-buildup complex with lots of clauses. Sentence style gives authors their distinctive rhythm. (Some you fox-trot to; to others, you clog.) Some people are more Ernest Hemingway, short and sweet; but others are Faulkner: occasionally a single page can't contain a sentence. When it comes to words, we should be ourselves. Don't ever use a vocabulary that's alien to you. I was delighted to see Kentucky writer Silas House, in *Clay's Quilt*, use “founder” as a verb as in “that kid's foundered on peanut butter, he ate so much”; and he's the first Appalachian author I recall using the verb “pack,” as he does frequently in *A Parchment of Leaves*, to mean “carry.” Those and many other delightful words and phrases are natural—for him—and it's one of many reasons to enjoy his work. Short and sweet, or long and breathless, fancy or plain are the extremes we move among, and we should choose our words and sentences consciously. The style we veer toward most often becomes a component of voice (and, therefore, style).

But in a way those technical differences, important as they are, are rather superficial, compared to other components. Above all, I believe voice is the result of the subject matter we explore, over and over: the terrain one can't get away from, the vein one mines, the river one swims upstream in. I've always thought that one's subject matter finds the writer, not vice versa. It seemed true for me. When I began 30 years

ago, I wrote about people and places in West Virginia, in my bone-home (that home that's coded inside your bones, inside the marrow). The first "successful" story I wrote in college, published in Concord College's literary magazine *Reflexes*, was about the death of my best friend's father. I didn't know it then, but it was definitely in the tradition of Autobiographical Fiction (ABF). There are a thousand approaches to writing fiction, a million things to write about, and I encourage my students to try them all, to write whatever they wish. However, a really good place to start is ABF. You might possibly find a more authentic voice, as I did—and most of my favorite Appalachian or Southern writers, like Denise Giardina, Breece Pancake, James Still, Wendell Berry, Gurney Norman and Silas House—seem to have, with ABF.

What is that, exactly?

It's writing that, according to David Huddle, begins in memory ("Memory's Power" 16). However, it should not restrict itself to memory (not even nonfiction—today, "creative nonfiction" allows much embellishment if not downright fictionalizing to achieve its considerable power—read Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club* if you don't believe a memoir can pack as much punch as a good novel). I believe that many of us have enough memory and experience to write a body of work as large, and perhaps as authentic, as Denise Giardina or Dorothy Allison. It's that quality above all else, authenticity—the ability to show (not tell) that the writer's "been there, done that" and, like Ishmael, lived to tell the tale—that makes the reader believe. Authentic experience helps us create the "vivid, continuous dream" that John Gardner said good fiction must be (*The Art of Fiction* 31). That's the essence of ABF: it's so convincing that we forget we're reading fiction.

So how does one write so convincingly that, at its best, the distinction between fiction and factuality disappears? Writers must find the voice that belongs to them and only them, a voice that will make strangers (and if you're an Appalachian writer, make non-Appalachians) believe in your work. It's hard. And while it's not the only way, telling the physical truth is one of the most powerful. Appalachian writers, at least the best, like Pancake and Giardina, to name two fine West Virginia writers, re-create a whole world for us through physical reality. For instance, Giardina makes you see and feel the fog and river in the following passage from *Storming Heaven*:

The mists rose from the river each morning to cling to the mountaintops, and in the evenings, after a rain shower, patches of fog ran like a herd of sheep up the hillsides. I would go out then, breathe the air and feel it clean the bottom of my lungs. A path meandered behind the cabin down the riverbank. Grapevine was broad and green, slow running, never more than waist deep on a grown man save during the spring thaw. I waded out into the water, my skirt hiked to my thighs. Silver explosions of trout churned the water and minnows darted fearlessly about my legs. I came abreast a stand of cattails and halted. The sweep of Grapevine curved away north, its path to Shelby and the Levisa hidden by the far mountains layered one after another, the mist dancing up their flanks. Every way I turned the lush green peaks towered over me. Had it been winter or spring, they would have been iron gray, or dappled with pink and white dogwood, sarvis, and redbud, but always they would be there,

the mountains, their heights rounded by the elements like relics worn smooth by the hands of reverent pilgrims (31-32).

As obvious as the dictate is to include lots of sensual details from the world you inhabit in your fiction, it may take a while to pull it off as well as Giardina does (her use of the verb “halted” rather than “stopped” seems old-timey perfect to me). I’ve been told that I sometimes short my reader on this. There’s a thin line between not enough and too much physical description.

For example, one of the best early critiques I got, decades ago, from an honest colleague who’d read my story about a miner and his wife, was “I didn’t have coal dust on my shoulders when the story was over.” I’m certain now that I was imitating others, that my story was not written in an authentic voice. Now fast forward two decades to the Novel-in-Progress writer’s conference in Kentucky, where I workshopped Chapter One of my novel *I Was So Much Older Then*. During the session on my chapter, a woman whose speaking voice identified her as a true hill-country Appalachian, said that she thought I’d “nailed” Bluefield, West Virginia (called Kersey in my book) in the early sixties. It made me humbly grateful for all my mentors who encouraged me to find and write in my real voice. It took a while.

So: getting it right, naming the trees and birds, making your characters say the absolute right thing, having flowers bloom in the right season, giving your character in 1961 a paper, not styrofoam, coffee cup—this is, to me, and, I believe, to the reader, tremendously important. All writers have is their voice to *document*, as John Gardner calls it, the world as they see it (*The Art of Fiction* 23). Doing this well credentials you

as a writer the way no number of college degrees can (as important as college degrees are).

And by the way, watch who you listen to in developing your voice. Both of these critics I mentioned before could've been wrong. You'll eventually learn to know who to trust, though it takes some time (and perhaps pain). When a critic's comment resonates within you, hums in the middle of your chest, you know it's right. That can often mean it's the comment you at first most reject.

So, what am I saying—that my voice rings true when I'm describing towns like Bluefield but false when I'm describing miners and mining, about which I know very little? Am I saying my voice can never include coal mining? No. But if I don't own the material already due to birth and blood, I've got to do whatever it takes to own it; otherwise, the reader will know I'm faking it. Readers are never wrong—the best ones. I know now I can find ways to make a foreign experience mine—talk to miners; go down inside Beckley Exhibition Coal Mine; read the best, most accurate accounts—if I find I need to make it mine. In other words, research. (I wonder how many Appalachian writers the Foxfire books have helped—I know they've helped, and continue, to help me authenticate my fiction). But if research is not your cup of cappuccino, why not write about what *is* yours? Write about where you grew up, your people, their voices that you hear as clearly as the hymns you've sung in church all your life. Not because it's easier—it may, in fact, be harder: you may be emotionally too close, or you may fall into the autobiographical “trap” where you stick so close to the facts you bore or puzzle the reader. But the events you lived are yours to write by birthright, and you ought to consider it. Psychology, religion as well as literature vindicate the power released when

people tell their own stories. Consider the Catholic rite of confession and the success of Alcoholics Anonymous.

In my first published novel, I tried to tell my story. Semi-autobiographical (though still quite fictional), *I Was So Much Older Then* follows the story of young Danny Cahill from Kersey, then Gardner, West Virginia, from around age seven into his early twenties. I hope the story, in all its southern Appalachian particularity, is universal. I don't think you can really strive for universality in fiction, especially autobiographical fiction. Like voice, it arises naturally out of your material. You also need to tell readers a tale that's worthy of their time. And if it's Appalachian literature we're talking about (and we are), that ain't easy, because Appalachians are nothing if not tale-tellers. Here's where your magic enters in (you've got to do magic, too: another essential component of voice). You must transform mere Memory through the alchemy of Imagination, run it through the fire, where you play loose and fast with truth (or ignore it altogether), to arrive at Truth. If you're successful, then readers will say you've nailed it, your story is universal. But if you fail, and we all will occasionally, especially in early drafts, you produce those head-scratching well-I-guess-you-had-to-be-there moments, which I sometimes did in early versions of *I Was So Much Older Then*.

How do you get the magic to tell a good tale? If I knew the formula, I'd give it to you, but you know there isn't one and can't be, not for the bare-naked kind of writing I'm talking about. I will tell you this: get a good character—sometimes even a name will get you going (peruse old phonebooks). Then put your character into action, and usually good things will happen if you don't get lazy and just pick the first, second or third thing you think of. Readers want a surprise, always, but one that just *had* to happen, given this

set of characters in this time and place. And I challenge writers not to go for easy violence, which is epidemic in the writing of beginners. Yes, endings are HARD, but after you've resolved your story with a high body count or by having the protagonist wake up and find it was all a dream (please, NO!), go back and re-read with your third eye (it might help to wait a week or a month or a year). Then I hope you will see that the resolution, the seeds of what *should* happen, are embedded right there inside the story, waiting for you to discover like a missing puzzle piece. Usually it won't be violence; almost always it'll involve the protagonist acting, successfully or not, to help him/herself. Often it'll be as subtle as someone touching someone else's arm, someone going back to work, someone heading down an empty dirt road.

Here's where Memory and Imagination part ways; because what *should* happen is always more important than what *did* happen. What really happened could be much more spectacular—maybe there was a body count, an awesome coincidence or a thunderbolt from the blue. Life is full of such crazy stuff, but you can't use it in fiction because it defies the rational, and realistic tales that grab and hold readers' attention must be rational (though, of course, mysterious and ambiguous). If you enter your own tale deeply, over and over with humility and curiosity, you will finally know what should happen, though you need not necessarily know all that it means (students constantly uncover new things about Danny, the protagonist of *I Was So Much Older Then*, things that, after my shock wears off, resonate with truth.)

The final component of voice may be the hardest. You can't just tell any old truths, the easy stuff you'd tell anybody. You have to tell the darkest secrets. No one wants to hear the easy lies, the clichés. As playwright Arthur Miller says, "The best work

that anybody ever writes is the work that is on the verge of embarrassing him, always” (as qutd. in Keyes 20). I agree. But wait, you say, writing about yourself, your people, their customs, the insides of their houses, their closets, attics and basements could be uncomfortable, or worse: it could be libelous; it could cause bad blood; it could bring . . . *shame*. Still, you’ve got to own your material, *all* your material, along with the baggage that comes with it—and that means owning it emotionally and taking full responsibility for it. But I assure you from personal experience, it can be transcendent, healing for you and for your reader. Along these lines, Henry Miller said:

The only writers I respect . . . are those who have put themselves completely into their work. Not those who use their skillful hands to do something . . . [for if] it isn’t representative completely of him, of his personality, then there’s something wrong there. This man is a fraud I prefer a man who is unskillful, who is an awkward writer, but who has something to say, who is dealing himself one time on every page (as qutd. in Keyes 75).

His personality: his voice. It’s your story, so tell the truth in your own voice. Write as if your life depended on it, as it well may; and so may the reader’s. But that doesn’t mean it will be easy, or it won’t be uncomfortable or messy, or embarrassing. I’ll let the wise David Huddle have the last word:

What I want in a story, and I suspect it is what most people want, is . . . passion and necessity. I don’t want what the writer throws out of his closet onto the floor behind him; I want his best brandy, and I want him to take me to the special room where he keeps the thing in the house that he

cares about the most, and I want him to tell me about it in such a way that I begin to care for that thing, too (“Memory’s Power” 22).

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