

DEAR WRITER: LETTER ONE

So You Wanted to be Agatha Christie
The importance of writing about about things you know

All these materials for literary work were nothing else than my past life.—Proust

Dear Writer,

The manuscript of your short story, 'The Scream at Midnight', has been given to me for my assessment, and I have read the letter you sent with the story. You say you often feel depressed and isolated, living in a country town and taking up story writing. I can understand that. Writing is a solitary occupation at any time, and must be a very lonely thing when you are the only person doing it for miles around. I'm glad you saw our advertisement in the paper, and I hope that my comments on your work will inspire you to write more. In fact the invention of stories is in itself a sort of insurance against loneliness because you can create characters with whom you become involved. Then when your work is published you will be communicating with all kinds of strangers. In *The Cinderella Complex*, Colette Dowling wrote: 'What impelled me to begin writing was that I didn't want to be alone any more.'

In the story you sent you have drawn a wonderfully promising group of characters. The busybody, Amelia, is particularly strong and interesting. I

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feel at once that I know her. She dominates the story, even though you have not meant her to be the main character. Why not let her be the main one? Often when a writer sets out to write a story about one thing or one character, a complete different matter or a different character starts to take control. The writer of fiction has the freedom to let the story take its own direction. However, the writer has to have overall control. As you become more experienced you will be able to balance the different freedoms and controls involved in the business of writing.

First of all I want to sum up your plot:

A group of neighbours hears a scream in the middle of the night. They all imagine something terrible has happened. However there is a simple, sad, but funny explanation for the noise. This is not a very strong plot, and the characters are suffering from being forced into it. You seem to have thought of the plot first, and then put in the characters.

Probably no such thing as a new plot exists. Yours is not weak because it is common, it is weak because you have borrowed it. I know you didn't sit down and think: 'Now which plot can I borrow today?' These borrowings come to us unconsciously. They sneak up on us, and if we succumb to the temptation to borrow them and force them on our writing, then our writing will suffer.

Only one source is available to you for the material of your fiction. That source is your own experience, your own life, your own memory, your own dreams, and your own imagination. The busybody is probably like somebody you know or used to know, and she is strong and vital in the story. Before you put another character or situation down on paper, you must examine your own memory. I suggest you spend a few minutes recalling your early life. Remember the house where you lived when you were six. Remember the people, the food, the toys, garden, sounds, smells. Is there an incident that stands out in your memory of this time? You could continue to think quietly about the distant past and then start to write an account of an incident from your early life. Begin with the words: 'I remember'.

This is the first exercise I give the students who come to classes to study the writing of fiction. It is a simple enough exercise, you would think. But some people find it very difficult. Some students are so frightened and shocked by what they remember and what they write and what they discover in the writing that they leave the class forever or don't come back for a long time. They come to a fiction writing class to write borrowed stories and they find the idea of discovering and exposing their own memories and feelings too much to bear. They seem to me to be thinking: 'Oh, I wanted to be

Agatha Christie or David Malouf; I didn't want to be me.' The excuses they sometimes give for their disappearances are often interesting pieces of fiction. One student said she was leaving because she objected to the way I was dressed. (My dressing was too flamboyant for her, whereas another writer who was teaching a class had a student who left because she couldn't trust a man who wore brown.) But many students find that this exercise sets them on a path of self-discovery that can lead them, after a period of time and a lot of work, to the creation of fiction.

I don't mean to suggest that all fiction is an autobiographical account of events, or even that fiction is grounded in the remembered life of the author. All I am saying at this stage is that my experience with the students has shown me that a sure approach, a fair beginning, to the creation of fiction can be made through exploration of the life of the writer. The memory of early life is only the beginning, only an important first exercise in your development as a writer of fiction.

To illustrate the point about finding your material within your own experience of life, here is a story from the *Arabian Nights*:

A merchant in Baghdad lived in a house with a grey marble courtyard in a cobbled street lined with palm trees.

At the far end of the courtyard of the house, beneath a flowering vine, was a fountain of white marble. One night the merchant had a dream in which he was instructed to go to Cairo to seek his fortune. So he set off. In Cairo he fell asleep in the courtyard of a mosque and was accused of breaking into the house next door to rob it. He was put into prison where he explained to the chief of police that he had done nothing wrong but was following his dream.

'Fool,' said the chief of police, 'where has your dream got you but into prison? I had a dream. I had it three times. But I would not be so foolish as to obey it.'

'What did your dream tell you?'

'My dream told me to go to Baghdad where I would find a house with a grey marble courtyard in a cobbled street lined with palm trees. At the far end of the courtyard, beneath a flowering vine, is a fountain of white marble. Beneath the fountain there lies buried a great fortune.'

Saying nothing the merchant returned to his home, dug beneath the fountain and discovered the treasure.

I have not completely forgotten about ‘The Scream at Midnight’. I have tried to demonstrate what I see to be the first error you have fallen into—that of looking for your stories in the wrong place. In a sense, your stories are inside you, and you have been looking only outside for them. You must look at your own experience for your material. The outside world will give you inspiration and ideas, but your writing will not succeed until you begin to understand that your own life is central to your work. I say ‘central’, and I mean only that something essential to you is the core of your writing—as you move into your work, you will find the untold riches of your imagination, and without the play of your imagination, no amount of straight recollection will make a body of fiction.

In ‘The Scream at Midnight’ you have made a good start, especially as I said, with the character of Amelia. I will discuss some of the technical problems in your story next time I write. Leave that story aside for the time being and concentrate on the exercise I have suggested in this letter. I look forward to seeing more of your work.

With best wishes,
Virginia O’Day