

## Connecting Words: How it All Starts

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A talk at a session titled Taking the Plunge, at the Melbourne-Age Writer's Festival, Friday 31 August 2001, with David Malouf, Julietta Jameson and Helen Garner

There is an ambiguity that I like in the subject of this session. Until recently I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to talk about how my writing career started or how I start writing a new piece of work. The reason that I like this ambiguity is that, it is almost impossible to talk about one without the other. Your self-identity as a writer—that is turning writing into your vocation and seeing yourself as a writer—is often a precarious one because in a sense you are re-assessing this identification every time you write a new piece, in a way that I think is rather unusual in other professions.

The mild risk implied in the title also applies to both. You take the plunge when you decide to become a writer but equally when you embark on writing a long piece of work. Risk is there simply because as the writing proceeds, say on a novel, you have to kill off options and destroy bridges. This is how the work takes shape. Later on, there are things you can change and things you cannot, precisely because of the choices you made earlier. And if these choices happen to be wrong, you are left with a worthless manuscript—a hundred-thousand-word testimony to your inadequacy, that will embarrass even your mother.

So how do I start a new piece of work? I remember very clearly how one specific chapter in my first novel started. In 1993, I was living, working and writing in Paris. I had left Lebanon back in 1986, in the middle of the civil war, and had lived in England for six years, where I developed a taste for English-language fiction. I had moved to France a few months earlier. The novel was at a very early stage and I don't think I even knew for certain that it was going to be a novel. Except for one piece, the first few paragraphs that I wrote were about war landscapes—downtown Beirut, shelters, roadblocks. They had characters in them but only to the extent that war landscapes need silhouettes, alongside rubble, sandbags and guns.

I had all sorts of insecurities in relation to writing in English, of course. Not least of which was the fact that Arabic not English was my mother tongue. At school in Beirut, French was my second language not English. English came later, slowly in complementary school and then intensively in secondary school and at University. Besides, I had no professional writing

experience and had studied engineering not humanities. I was writing in English because I had developed a taste for English-language fiction and because I loved the element of discovery in writing in another language. The upside was that writing in English was less problematic than writing in French for me, it did not carry to the same extent the colonial dimension of French, since in Lebanon it was not the English but the French, and the Turks before them, who had sought to make us civilized, with little success, fortunately.

Until I went to a writer's workshop and received formal feedback on my manuscript, which was about fifteen months after I started writing, I had no anchor except my appreciation of my own writing, which was hardly sufficient. And of course, I never dared claim to be a writer until much later. Even eminently successful writers have said that, in their extreme moments of insecurity, they felt like impostors. The problem is that when you're just starting and still unpublished, this doesn't reflect just your own feelings but probably everyone else's feelings about you, if you were to ask them.

But let me go back to this chapter I mentioned earlier. One day, as I was traveling by bus from home to my place of work, a sentence landed in my mind out of nowhere:

He likes to play games.

Nothing came with the sentence. I had no idea who the He was. I had no idea what games he was playing. I don't even recall that a conscious image or sound or experience had triggered it. It was just a mysterious set of words. And there was something seductive about it. It kept playing in my head for a couple of days, like a tune that you can't get rid of. Now, you might argue that this is hardly a recipe for literary achievement, more of a fast ticket to an asylum. And the idea must have occurred to me because the bus that I took every day actually drove past a mental hospital. When I think about it now, my bus, more than my fiction, opened up a lot of interesting possibilities. But other words started building around this sentence. The next set of words was something like:

Keeping people in thrall. At a disadvantage. Not knowing his next move.

Slowly a setting and then a character started emerging. Over the next four weeks, the sentence became a chapter about a sniper, living on the roof of a high-rise building and terrorizing the city. And the sniper entered another chapter I had been writing, and became a

protagonist of the novel. There is something magical about this chapter when I look at it now because I have a strong memory of the time when it was a single sentence.

John Irving wrote in a recent book that language is what matters most in the practice of writing—not plot, not characters and not events. What’s interesting is what he wrote next about the implications of this central position of language for the genesis of the novel. He wrote to the effect that when he starts writing, everything about plot, characters and events is already known to him because he wants to focus on the language. What I find interesting is that, in my own experience, the same premise, that is, the central position of language – scenes built around sentences – led me to the exact opposite practice: that characters, plot and events emerged, during the act of writing, from the text. I find this process to be a convenient way of writing because it allows me to experiment with the language. But it also resonates with another aspect of the novel that I had to grapple with. Did men create landscapes of violence or are my characters the creation of these landscapes? Where does the agency of the characters lie? This is the observer’s problem, the author’s, of course, not the character’s. And I think that in writing *Tell the Running Water*, I had a sense in which my lens was approaching the scenes from a distance, seeing characters as an intrinsic part of the landscapes at first, then when the lens is close enough, the characters acquiring substance precisely by affirming their agency against, and independence from, the landscapes of violence.

I often wonder whether writers have writing techniques or whether different novels require different writing techniques. I am now about to finish the draft of a second novel and has started thinking about my third one. In this case, I have in mind a character, a story and a loose plot despite the fact that I haven’t written a single word yet. Which makes me think sometimes that building scenes around sentences as a practice of writing may be a form of immaturity that I am about to grow out of. I am not sure.

But let me move from fiction to essays. If a mysterious set of words triggers a chapter in a novel, it is an association that does the trick in essays. In my own experience, of course. I published an essay recently in *Meanjin* about my own migration and I remember the seed for the article. I was walking into my office at the University of Sydney, back in 1995, a few days after I started working there and a couple of months after migrating to Australia. So I was still a foreigner in Sydney. I saw a printed flyer with the title: ‘Earless Cat Missing.’ The cat had had its ear chopped off in an accident the flyer said. Five minutes before that, on my way there through Redfern, I had come across quite a few students with pierced noses and

eyebrows and then I was walking past a café called the Three-Legged-Dog when a dog with an amputated leg limped out through the door.

It was all a bit unsettling. You start touching yourself to check that nothing was missing. Now the public talk about immigration made me re-think about my own migration and, for reasons I cannot remember, the cat flyer came back to me. First, there was ground for identification between me and the hapless cat with its lost ear and home. I had lost all hearing in one ear myself. I had lost my home too through migration. I wondered what the lost leg of the dog had done to its sense of itself. Did the dog think that, if it could lose a leg just like that, it could come undone completely? Was there a connection between the lost home and the lost ear of the cat? Is losing an ear, in any way, similar to losing a home? These thoughts eventually sparked an association: migration as mutilation. And there it went. The process was not of course as neat as I make it sound to be and has probably occurred over weeks and involved other images and ideas. However, the essay became a reflection on my own migration, what it had done to my sense of self and what kinds of relationships I can entertain with my old home and my new land.

In this case, it wasn't a mysterious set of words, as much as an association between seemingly disconnected elements or facts.

Incidentally, I discovered while writing the essay that while cats have seven lives in Arabic, they have nine in English. The implications, I thought, were tremendous. It means that, just by hopping onto a boat to Australia, any cat, in Baghdad, Jerusalem or Algiers, could gain two lives. Just like that. If the secret goes out, Australia would be swamped by Middle-Eastern cats. And we couldn't claim that they are just looking for *a* better life in the West. Somebody should alert the immigration minister. Lucky we have at the realm someone who knows a danger when he sees it. Thank you.