

THE SUCCESSFUL NOVELIST
BY DAVID MORRELL

CHAPTER ONE
WHY DO YOU WANT TO BE A WRITER?

When I teach at writers' conferences, I always begin by asking my students, "What defect in your personality makes you want to be writers?" They chuckle, assuming that I've made a joke. But my question is deadly serious. Writing is so difficult, requiring such discipline, that I'm amazed when someone wants to give it a try. If a student is serious about it, if that person intends to make a living at it, the commitment of time and energy is considerable. It's one of the most solitary professions. It's one of the few in which you can work on something for a year, with no certainty that your efforts will be accepted or that you'll get paid. On every page, confidence fights with self-doubt. Every sentence is an act of faith. Why would anybody want to do it?

The usual answer I get is, "For the satisfaction of being creative." My students nod, relieved that this troubling line of thought is over. But in fact, the subject has barely been started. I rephrase my question, making it less threatening. "Why do you want to be writers?" This time, I tell my students I don't want to hear about the joy of creativity. Squirms. Glances toward the ceiling. Toward the floor. Someone is honest enough to say, "I'd like to earn the kind of money Stephen King does." Someone else chuckles. "Who wouldn't?" We're on our way.

Money. We're so used to hearing about the fantastic advances that writers like King, John Grisham, Tom Clancy, and Patricia Cornwell receive that many would-be writers think generous advances are the norm. The truth is that, in the United States, maybe as few as a thousand fiction writers make a living at it. Every Thursday, in *USA Today's* entertainment section, there's a list of the top fifty best-selling books. Nonfiction is grouped with fiction, hardbacks with paperbacks. Fifty books. A longer list of 150 books is available on that newspaper's Internet site. The lowest book might have sold only a thousand copies nationwide. Seen from this perspective, the figure of a thousand fiction writers who make a living at it seems huge. A couple of years ago, I came across an article somewhere that said the average income for a fiction writer in the United States was \$6,500. The prospects have changed somewhat with the advent of e-books. Nonetheless, I tell my student that anyone who wants to become a writer had better think twice about giving up his or her day job.

"Why do you want to be writers?" I repeat. The squirms are more uncomfortable. Someone admits, not in so many words, that it would be neat to be the subject of magazine articles and appear on the *Today* show. The writer as movie star. We go back to the usual suspects: King, Grisham, Clancy, and Cornwell. Again, the *USA Today* list gives us perspective. Scan the names of the top fifty authors. I doubt that more than twenty will be familiar to you. Even fewer writers are famous than earn a living at it. More important, while I can't imagine anyone foolish enough to turn down money, I have trouble understanding why someone would want to be famous. As Rambo's creator, I have experience in that regard, and if your idea of a good time is to be forced to get an unlisted number, swear your friends to secrecy about your address, and hire private

detectives because of stalkers, you're welcome to it. One of my devoted fans talks to my dead mother and to the brother I never had. Another was never in the military, but having convinced himself that he's Rambo, he tried to sue me for stealing his life. In a connection I have yet to understand, he also tried to sue the governor of New York and the Order of the Raccoon, which I thought was an organization that existed only in Jackie Gleason's television show, *The Honeymooners*. Fame's dangerous, not to mention shallow and fleeting. I'm reminded of what a once-important film producer said to me before his fortunes turned for the worst: "Just remember, David. Nobody lasts forever."

So if money and notoriety aren't acceptable answers to "Why do you want to be a writer?" and if I won't accept the easy answer, "Because of the satisfaction of being creative," what's left? My students squirm deeper into their chairs. At this point, I mention someone who seems extremely unlikely in this context: comedian/film-maker Jerry Lewis. The students chuckle once more, assuming that this time I've definitely made a joke. But I haven't. Years ago, Jerry Lewis taught a seminar in comedy at the University of Southern California. A hot ticket. How did Jerry decide which of the many students who applied for the course actually got to attend? Did he audition them? Did he ask for tapes of their performances? Did he read printed versions of their routines? Not at all. He merely asked for an answer to the following question: "Why do you want to be a comedian?" And there was only one answer he would accept.

"Because I need to be. Because there's something in me so nagging and torturing and demanding to get out that I absolutely need to make people laugh."

Why do you want to be a writer?

Because you need to be.

My students glance up and nod, their relieved expressions saying, "Sure. Right." They have the contented look they displayed when they decided they wanted to be writers because of the satisfaction of being creative. But we're still in the land of easy answers. Do they truly understand what "need to be" means? A long time ago when I was a literature professor at the University of Iowa, a student came to my office and announced that she was going to be a writer.

"When was the last time you wrote?" I asked.

"Six months ago," she answered.

I politely suggested that she might consider another line of work.

Writers write. It's that basic. If you just got off an assembly line in a factory and you're certain you have the great American novel inside you, you don't grab a beer and sit in front of the TV. You write. If you're a mother of three toddlers and at the end of the day you feel like you've been spinning in a hamster cage and yet you're convinced you have a story to tell, you find a way late at night or early in the morning to sit down and write. That's a version of how Mary Higgins Clark succeeded, by the way. Because she had to. Because something inside her absolutely insisted. A half hour a day. A page a day. Whatever it takes.

Tough stuff. The profession is not for the weak willed or the faint of heart. But there's a pay off, and it has nothing to do with money (although it would be nice if hard work were rewarded), and it certainly has nothing to do with seeing your name in the newspaper. The satisfaction of being creative? Sure. But only partly and only as it relates to my next and final question. "You need to be a writer. *Why?*" This is the key to the

treasure. Why do you absolutely need to be a writer? What's the source of the uneasiness that nags at you, the compulsion to tell stories and put word after word on a blank page?

That question is one of the most important challenges any would-be writer will ever face in his or her creative life. How honest are you prepared to be with yourself? When I was a young man learning my craft, I met my first professional writer, an expert in science fiction whose pen name was William Tenn and whose real name was Philip Klass. Klass didn't like the early stories I showed him because their subject matter was familiar. They weren't any different from hundreds of other stories he'd read, he told me. The writers who go the distance, he insisted, have a distinct subject matter, a particular approach that sets them apart from everyone else. The mere mention of their names, Faulkner, for example, or Edith Wharton, conjures themes, settings, methods, tones, and attitudes that are unique to them.

How did they get to be so distinctive? By responding to who they were and the forces that made them that way. *Everyone* is unique, Klass told me. No two lives are identical. The writers who discover what sets them apart are the writers with the best chance of succeeding. "Look inside yourself," Klass urged. "Find out who you are. In your case, I suspect that means find out what you're most afraid of, and that will be your subject for your life or until your fear changes." But he didn't mean fear of heights or closed spaces or fire. Those fears were merely versions of much deeper fears, he explained. The fear he was talking about was like a ferret gnawing at my soul. The ferret didn't want to be caught, though. It was going to take all my honesty and introspection to find it and determine what it was.

I eventually called this method "fiction writing as self-psychoanalysis." The theory goes like this—most people become writers because they're haunted by secrets they need to tell. The writers might not know they have secrets, or if they suspect they do, they might not be sure what these secrets are, but something in each person is bursting to get out, to be revealed. This revelations might relate to traumas that happened to the writers as adults. A lot of young men came back from the Vietnam War wanting to write novels about what they endured in combat, for example. More often, though, the secrets surround things that occurred in childhood and were never understood. To paraphrase Graham Greene, an unhappy childhood can be a gold mine for a fiction writer. Abuse comes to mind, but not necessarily sexual. Any psychological trauma, never adjusted to, can be the impetus for someone to want to be a storyteller. A contentious divorce in which one child went with mom and the other went with dad. Or a large family in which one child never got the attention that the others did. Dickens fits this theory well. After his father went to prison for failing to pay his debts, the young Dickens was taken out of school and forced to be work in a squalid factory. Prisons, oppressed children, and the suffering of the poor are constants in his work.

Hemingway fits this theory, also. His prim hometown of Oak Park, Illinois, was where the saloons ended and the churches began. In his conflicted household, his mother wanted him to wear sissy clothes and play the cello while his father encouraged him to hunt, fish, and play football. His best times were summers spent at a lake up in Michigan, where the outdoors provided an escape from family disagreements. As soon as Hemingway was old enough, he fled his repressive environment, tried to enlist as a soldier in the First World War, was turned down because of weak eyes, and finally got accepted as a Red Cross ambulance driver on the Italian front. His almost immediate duty

was to pick up body parts after a massive munitions explosion. A few assignments later, he visited an Italian sentry post where an Austrian mortar killed the Italian soldiers with him and riddled him with shrapnel. While he struggled to reach cover, an enemy machine gun shot him.

The consequence of all this was that Hemingway suffered from what is now termed post-traumatic stress disorder, with symptoms that included insomnia and nightmares. But once he had sufficient distance from the war, his imagination returned again and again to those traumas, using them in his first mature stories and novels. From his boyhood on, Hemingway had wanted to be a writer, but his early attempts had been conventional and flat. One of his teachers, Gertrude Stein, told him to throw it all away and start over. As soon as Hemingway confronted his nightmares, he did start over, using a tense, lean style to communicate the “grace under pressure” that his characters, like himself, struggled to achieve from their tense childhoods onward. Understanding the importance of trauma to a writer, Hemingway once advised a would-be writer to hang himself but to arrange for a friend to cut him down before he died. That way, the would-be writer would have something to put on paper.

As for my own traumas, my father (whom I never knew) died in the Second World War. As I grew up, I keenly missed the affectionate attention of a male authority figure. My feeling of abandonment was reinforced when my mother, in dire financial straits, was forced to put me in an orphanage when I was four. Eventually, she reclaimed me. Or was the woman who took me from that orphanage the same person who put me in it? Am I adopted? To provide me with a father, she remarried, but my stepfather and I didn’t get along. We lived above a bar and a hamburger joint. Drunks fought under our windows. We couldn’t afford a telephone, so when my mother needed to make a phone call, she went to a pay phone in the alley below. Once, a stray gunshot shattered the phone booth’s window. At night, the arguments between my mother and stepfather were so severe that I fearfully put pillows under my bed covers and made them look as if I slept there. Then I crawled under the bed to sleep where I hoped I’d be protected if anyone came into my room to harm me. I made trouble at school. In grade six, I belonged to a street gang.

An objective observer would realize how disturbed my youth was. But to me, since it was the only reality I knew, my youth was normal. That’s the thing about youthful traumas. Most of the time, we don’t know they’re extraordinary. Only when I was in my twenties did I begin to come to terms with the psychological ordeals of my youth. By then, I was writing fiction, and even when I was dramatizing a metaphoric son in conflict with a metaphoric father (*First Blood*), it was only belatedly that I understood my fascination with the topic. Fathers and sons. The theme shows up in many of my books. I’m still adjusting to the death of the father I never knew, and writing fiction is how I accomplish that—or try to.

Consider *your* traumas, or perhaps you don’t feel that you’ve had any. A writer friend once told me that *he* hadn’t had any traumas, that his childhood was about as perfect as any child could want, until his father died. He added that comment about his father’s death as an aside, something that he gave the impression that he’d gotten over. But his fiction reveals that he’s still adjusting to his father’s death, for in numerous books, he dramatizes an idealized version of his childhood that always ends with something terrible happening. In a similar fashion, *you* might be unaware of how certain

events in your life affected you so strongly that they compel you to want to be a writer. A better sense of the incidents that motivate you could take you farther on your way to reaching the Holy Grail of writers: a subject matter that's your own.

How do you discover what those traumas and that subject matter are? Here's an exercise that I've found to be helpful. People often ask me where my story ideas come from. Repeating a joke by Stephen King, I answer that there's a company in Cleveland or some such place. It's called the Writers Idea Shop, and the first of every month, it sends me a box of ideas. This usually gets a laugh, after which I say that actually ideas swarm around me all the time—from newspapers, magazines, and television, from casual comments that my wife makes, from things my cat does, whatever. This is partially true. But it's a simple answer to a complex question, and only if I feel that the person I'm talking to has the time and is receptive do I say the following.

My ideas don't come from outside. They come from within—from my daydreams. I'm not referring to the type of daydream that you consciously create: deliberately imagining how wonderful it would be to achieve a coveted goal, for example. Instead, I mean the type of daydream that comes to you spontaneously, an unbidden message from your subconscious. Basically, the deepest part of you is sending a story to the surface. Pay attention. The primal author in you is at work.

Daydreams come in two types: attractive and repelling. You're at a business meeting or you're driving the kids to school, and all of a sudden, in your imagination, you're on the beach at Cancun. No surprise there. You're bored with what you're doing. Your subconscious transported you to a pleasurable experience. Note how I phrased that statement. Out of boredom, *you* didn't transport yourself. Your subconscious did. You had no control over it. You could strain your imagination all day and still not create as total and sensual an experience as your subconscious did. You don't just see that beach. You hear the waves splashing. You feel the sand beneath you, the heat of the sun on your skin, and the tickle of the breeze in your nostrils. You taste the salt on the rim of your margarita. You smell the sweetness of an approaching afternoon rain shower. It's not like watching a movie in your mind. A movie is apart from you, on a flat screen, presenting only images and sound. *This* is a three-dimensional imaginary experience that totally surrounds you, engaging all your physical senses.

Now let's talk about the other kind of daydream—the repellent one. You're at a business meeting or you're driving the kids to school, and suddenly, in your imagination, as vividly as in the Cancun experience, you're trapped in a terrifying wide-awake nightmare. Interestingly, while most of us would agree that lying on the beach at a luxury resort is a situation we'd like to be in, we don't have the same consensus when it comes to what terrifies us. I have a friend with a phobia about snakes. In contrast, I find snakes kind of interesting. Another friend doesn't like closed spaces whereas they don't bother me a bit. Other things scare me a lot, though. All you need to do is read my fiction to find out what they are.

Consider the implications. It's understandable why the subconscious would transport us from boring real-life situations into pleasurable fantasies. But why on Earth does the subconscious sometimes transport us from those same boring real-life situations into fantasies that are terrifying? From one point of view, the mechanism doesn't make sense. From another point of view, it makes all kinds of sense, and it parallels my question to my students: "Why do you want to be writers?" Why do you have

spontaneous wide-awake nightmares? And what is the principle of selection by which your subconscious terrifies you in one way while *my* subconscious terrifies me in another?

We're at the heart of the issue. The difference between fiction writers and civilians is that we make it our life's work to put our daydreams and day-nightmares on paper. Most of the time we don't understand the secrets and demons that our spontaneous imaginings contain. All we feel is that there's something in us demanding to be released in the form of a story. Philip Klass told me, "What you fear is like a ferret gnawing at your soul. The more you try to catch it, the more it tries to hide. You'll only get hints and guesses of what and where it is." To this, I add: Day-nightmares are messages from your subconscious, hinting to you what that ferret is about. They're disguised versions of your secret. They're metaphors for why you want to be a writer.

The breakthrough I had as a writer came one hot August afternoon when I was twenty-five. I'd been writing tired, conventional fiction for so long that I was in creative despair. With all my heart, I wanted to be a writer, but I had no idea why I felt that way or what I wanted to write about. At the end of my creative resources, I gave up—and immediately had the most intense wide-awake nightmare I'd ever experienced. I was making my way through a sweltering forest. Bushes crowded me. Sweat rolled down my face. I heard noises behind me. At first, I assumed that a squirrel was rooting for something in the underbrush. But as the sporadic rustle of leaves came closer, the noise seemed more and more like cautious footsteps. Someone was in the forest with me. Someone was creeping up on me. I can't express how vividly I felt that I was actually in that forest—and how fearfully certain I was that someone intended to kill me. As abruptly as it came, the multisensory illusion ended. It was as if I'd had an out-of-body experience. Suddenly, I found myself staring not at a forest but at my desk and the typewriter on it, a blank sheet of paper taunting me. I'd never experienced any other daydream as powerfully. I didn't understand the process, but one thing I was sure of: I wanted to know what happened next. Thus I began my first true David Morrell short story.

Ever since that long-ago afternoon, I trained myself to pay attention to my daydreams/nightmares, to be aware of them as they're happening, to wonder why certain imaginary situations are so insistent, and to use the most compelling of them as the inspiration for novels and short stories. After the fact, I learned to realize how the plots that attract me are metaphors for my psyche. That story about a man being hunted in a forest dramatizes the helplessness I felt at that time. What was hunting me? Time, ambition, frustration—name it. In the story, the hero (me) survived by overcoming his fear and maintaining control, a theme that is constant in my work. Another constant theme shows up in my novel, *The Brotherhood of the Rose*. There, two orphans are trained by a surrogate father to be killers for a rogue intelligence agency. They don't kill for money or politics. They do it for love. And when the surrogate father turns against them in order to protect himself, they set out in a fury to get even. That plot is as Freudian as can be. But I wrote the entire novel before I realized why my subconscious would have compelled me to write about orphans and fathers. The plot was a disguised version of the story of my life.

I want to emphasize the word "disguised." I'm not suggesting that you write stories that explicitly address your psychological concerns. That would be tedious and

mechanical. Plots are at their best when they serve as metaphors for, and not explicit descriptions of, their author's psychological state. That's what daydreams are: disguises. More often than not, the author can't see through them. All the writer knows is that the story insisted on being told, that his or her imagination wouldn't rest until the images and characters that haunted it were brought into the light. The best stories choose us. We don't choose them.

I think that the *type* of stories we tell also chooses us. I referred to Stephen King a couple of times. Might as well do it again. Critics often ask him (their tone is sniffingly aloof) why he writes horror. King's response is, "What makes you think I have a choice?" Exactly. In his book *On Writing*, King describes the brutal poverty of his childhood and the twelve miles he hitchhiked each Saturday to a movie theater that specialized in horror movies, the latter providing a distraction from his poverty. The horror novels, stories, and comic books he compulsively read fulfilled the same function. Made-up horror helped him temporarily forget the burdens of life. Is it any surprise that his urge to write led him to tell the kind of stories that gave him relief when he was a boy?

A similar urge led me to write thrillers. When I was a kid, the family arguments drove me from our apartment above the hamburger joint. I went to a crowded bus stop, where I asked someone to give me a nickel. "Mister, I lost my bus fare." A nickel is what it cost to get a ride on the bus, but fifteen cents is what it cost to get into a movie, which was my goal. So when everybody got on the bus, I hung back and went to another bus stop, where I again begged for a nickel. If the bus stops didn't get me enough money, I waited outside bars, hoping that drunks would lose coins as they came outside, trying to pocket their money. Often my patience was rewarded. When I finally had my fifteen cents, I then needed to beg an adult going into the movie theater to buy a ticket for me (I was only ten, and because it was after dark, I couldn't get into the theater by myself). I always picked a young couple who didn't have wedding rings. "Mister, will you please pretend I'm your kid and buy my ticket for me? I promise you'll never see me again when we're inside." The reason I picked unmarried couples was, the woman would look at the man to see how he reacted to a child's request (that is, what kind of father would this guy be?). Sensing that he was being tested, each man always bought my ticket.

So, finally, I was in the theater, which in those days looked like a palace. Safely away from the family arguments, I escaped into the movie on the screen. The films that made the most impression on me were Hitchcock-type thrillers. So is it any wonder that the stories I love to tell are the kind that gave me an escape when I was a kid? And is it any wonder that the fan letters I most treasure are from readers trying to cope with a personal disaster? A divorce, a fire, a flood, a crippling car accident, a loved one's death, the loss of a job—name the worst thing that happened to you. People trying to survive these things write to thank me for distracting them from their pain, just as I was distracted in that movie theater when I was a troubled child.

Apply this mechanism to yourself. Perhaps you want to write romances or science fiction or mainstream novels. Unlike many critics, I make no distinction in terms of whether any type of fiction is more worthy than any other type. They all offer opportunities for imagination and verbal skills. In this regard, Peter Straub is a model. He wrote *Ghost Story* and *Mystery* with such respect, brought to those genres such literary honesty, that he showed us the essence of what a ghost story and a mystery are. Any type

of story is only a means—what a writer does with it is what matters. You'll find it revealing if, after asking yourself "Why do I want to be a writer?", you ask yourself, "Why do I want to write this particular kind of fiction?"

"Because I need to."

"Why do you need to?"

If you follow the logic in the progression of these questions, if you pay attention to the ferret that's gnawing inside you, you'll have a subject matter that's your own. You'll also approach your favorite type of story in a way that has special meaning to you. You'll be an original and not an imitator. Because you're true to yourself. Because you use your unique one-of-a-kind psyche as your guide. It may be that you'll never be one of those thousand writers who earn a living at it. But that was never the point in the first place. You didn't become a writer to make money. You became a writer because your ferret and your daydreams/nightmares forced you to. If you do achieve financial success, all the better. But in the meantime, you did what you knew you must, and your reward was—only now is it a valid answer—the satisfaction of self-expression, of being creative.

(In a similar fashion, the rest of David's writing book, *THE SUCCESSFUL NOVELIST*, explains every step in writing a story, with a continued emphasis on how to find your own voice and subject matter. David's discussions about description and dialogue are especially valuable. About this book, Dean Koontz said, "I found the acute observations and the narrative philosophy more valuable for the new writer than the contents of any 100 other texts.")