

BOOK REVIEW

The Invisible Forces That Make Writing Work

Critic's Take

By ROGER ROSENBLATT AUG. 25, 2017

A couple of years ago, in an essay in *The New Yorker*, the critic and writer Kathryn Schulz pointed out that we cannot see most of the things that rule our lives. Magnetic fields, electric currents, the force of gravity all work unseen, as do our interior arbiters of thoughts, inclinations, passions, psyches, tastes, moods, morals, and — if one believes in them — souls. The invisible world governs the visible like a hidden nation-state.

The same is true of writing. You come up with an image, phrase or sentence. Your head snaps back, and you say to yourself, *Where did that come from?! I'm not talking about automatic writing, though that may be part of it. I mean the entire range of invisible forces that produce and affect the work. There are things the writer sees that the reader does not; things the reader sees that the writer does not; and things neither of us ever sees. These, the most entrancing of the lot, have a power of their own. Like the ghost of Jacob Marley, they lead to unimagined, sometimes frightful yet fruitful destinations.*

What the writer sees and keeps from the reader is the simplest of the three, because it deals mainly with craft. The planting of clues in poetry or prose, for instance. If we're doing our job, readers have no idea that what they have just read — a name, a place — will be picked up later in the piece, heaving with meaning. The clue is invisible as a clue. In a sense, the whole novel, play, essay or poem is invisible. The reader does not recognize the work (what writers call “work”) that

goes into the choices we fiddle with and blunder into before landing on the right ones. That's as it should be. "If it does not seem a moment's thought," said Yeats, "our stitching and unstitching has been naught."

Neither does the reader ever see the first draft, or the second, or the 19th. That the writer knows and recalls these drafts, even if dimly, has an invisible effect of its own. As a stanza or a character becomes better wrought, the writer more fully comprehends her or his intentions with the piece. An early draft is the child that becomes the man, who is more deeply understood for the author having witnessed the book's strange, meandering growth every step of the way. Fitzgerald's first stabs at "The Great Gatsby" had Tom, Daisy, Jordan and Gatsby going to a baseball game, a narrator named Dudley (or Dud) and two green lights at the end of Daisy's dock. Hovering discarded phantoms.

And the writer knows what has happened in a story before the story begins. All short stories are over before we read the first line. The story itself constitutes the key moment, the consequence of the invisible story that preceded it. Salinger had to know all about Seymour Glass before Seymour wound up in Florida, when we meet him in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." By that time, everything is too late.

What does the reader see that's invisible to the writer? Mainly, his or her own life. You write a book and send it into space. Go, little book. You have no idea where it lands — what effects it will have on a reader, who is invisible to you. There is that lovely moment for a writer when someone will say, Your book changed my life. (Lovely, that is, unless it changed it for the worse.) Writers do not see their readers, who remain a secret, with secret lives. Our transaction is unseen. We only hope that what we do is so generally true that those who read us will embrace our efforts as part of their stories. We write to an invisible world on which we depend. If you happen to recognize yourself in someone or something we create, that's all good. But the writer will never know that, or you. You are Harvey, our invisible, six-foot (we hope, gentle) big-eared friend.

But the greatest, and in some ways, the most satisfying invisibility is that world which neither writer nor reader will ever see, and yet knows exists. Jules Feiffer tells the story of starting his cartoons for The Village Voice. Before his first strip came out, his mother — who terrified and tyrannized Jules — warned him that if

there were a terrifying, tyrannizing woman in the strip, it better not look like her! Confident that his drawing looked nothing like his mother, Jules assured her she was safe. When the strip came out, Jules writes in his memoir, he stared at it. There was his mother.

Who knows where anything comes from in writing? Seamus Heaney tells of sensing a destiny in his poems directed by God, but whatever forces are credited, there's little question that most writers feel some inspirational push or tug connected with the work. And the inspirations have mysterious maps. Many a writer has started out certain of a particular direction only to change course midway, as though a ghost's hand took the tiller.

I am not unaware that my writing has improved in the nine years since our daughter's death. My work is sharper now, and more careful. Happily would I trade all the books I've written in those nine years for one moment with Amy alive, but since that bargain is impossible, I write to fill the void her death created. And something else: Since I believe it was Amy's death that led me to write more seriously, she lives with me invisible. I write to see her.

Roger Rosenblatt is the winner of the 2015 Kenyon Review Award for Literary Achievement. His latest book is "Thomas Murphy," a novel.

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