GILLIAN PEDERSON-KRAG

Interior, (fig. 83), 2010
oil on canvas, 18 x 21 in

courtesy: the artist

HILTON OBENZINGER

"Grandma Needs a Mimosa:" How Writers Find Ideas

This selection is from a work in progress How We Write: The Varieties of Writing Experience *that is based on a series of public "How I Write" conversations with writers at Stanford for more than a decade.*

How do writers find ideas? To find out, I decided to talk with several authors. "Sometimes I think writing is like fishing," says David Henry Hwang, who is celebrated for *M. Butterfly* and other plays. "You toss your line in and sometimes you catch a fish and sometimes you don't. An idea for a show or play can come from anyplace—someone else can suggest it, it can come from a newspaper article, it can come from your family history, it can come from a personal experience. It's just anything that gets you excited."

Novelists are well known for trolling through reality to find fiction. "Writers are always collecting bits of inspiration, scenes that they're seeing," novelist Tom Kealey said, citing a recent example:

> One day I was on the train and this grandmother got on with her two grandkids and she was dead tired. Obviously the two grandkids had run her ragged. And when she sat down she let out this big sigh and one of the grandkids said, "Grandma needs a nap." And Grandma looked at her and said, "Grandma needs a *mimosa*."

"You can't pass that up," Kealey laughed. He immediately wrote the scene down in his ever-present notebook. "All writers to some extent keep a writer's notebook," he added. "Some people keep their specially bound, fifteen-dollar, thirty-dollar notebooks. And others of us write ideas on cocktail napkins and on our hand. It's a good day when I'm just writing all over my hand." Once he harvested the scene in his notebook he would come back to it sometime later, and it could be a grand breakthrough. Other times he would see a note and be baffled: "'Man walks dog in rain and meets grandfather.' And I'll be like, 'What the hell was that?'"

Gavin Jones got an idea in a bar. Some people were talking nearby, but he didn't pay attention as he nursed his drink. Then, amidst the clink of glasses, he heard one voice above the others ask, "*Why doesn't anyone talk about poverty anymore?*" Jones had an epiphany at that moment. As a scholar of American literature and culture, this remark sprouted into a question related to his area of research: *Why is poverty neglected in the overall study of American literature?* As a result, he wrote *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in u.s. Literature, 1840–1945*. That

remark triggered a series of questions, with Jones stating the problem, the absence he sought to fill: "Scholars have largely overlooked the complexity of poverty as a subject of representation that runs throughout U.S. literature." *American Hungers* addresses that by looking at works by Herman Melville, Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, James Agee, Richard Wright, and others from a new perspective. Clearly, a critical thinker would have to be receptive, the pump primed, for such an offhand remark to mutate into a book. But if Gavin Jones could find the guy on the bar stool who asked that question, he would give him a copy of the book, buy him a drink, and thank him for all the trouble he caused.

Robert Sapolsky would get ideas for popular essays about science by overhearing cultural conversations and reading broadly outside of his field; he would particularly appreciate "crappy contemporary-culture-type stuff." He confesses that he is "completely obsessed with *People* magazine; it's the most fabulous source of material for science articles." Wait. Why in the world *People*? "I'm fairly socially disconnected," he explains; as an academic he would be working on his science all the time. "So I have no idea of what's going on in most of the world out there." Asked how *People* magazine helps, he responds:

> *People* magazine allows me to recognize the names of the most important humans on earth for the next ten minutes. It just gives me an anchoring for cultural references. I'll be reading along and stumble into something or other that's really quirky and bizarre and will spend the next two months obsessing over it.

Sometimes material in his own field could spark an essay. He wrote an article for *The New Yorker* after he came across a short piece in an academic neurology journal with the question, "Why can't we tickle ourselves?" He found it extremely interesting. "These people had actually done experiments with a tickle machine where they showed what parameters you need to modify so that people can now tickle themselves. And another group picked up on this and discovered a subset of schizophrenics who could tickle themselves. This was just irresistible, so I went berserk with this for about two months and wrote up something." At the end, his wife was relieved that the tickle machine project had come to a halt, so he would stop talking about tickling all the time. Professor Sapolsky described the obsessive process as getting the idea out of his system. Once done, he wouldn't think about it again, "then just stumble into the next weird, quirky thing."

Some writers combine a number of different suggestions to cook up an idea and keep cooking as they go along. Dr. Abraham Verghese began work on his novel *Cutting for Stone* when he attended the writer's workshop at the University of Iowa. He knew he wanted to write a book that would celebrate his love of medicine, that the plot would be set in Ethiopia (where he is from) but would end up in America, and that he would focus on a young Christian Indian boy like himself who was precocious about learning medicine. "I knew I wanted a mission hospital," he explained, remembering the work of missionaries in Africa. He also wanted a nun in the story. Nuns fascinated him, and he had in mind the image of a beautiful nun he had met in medical school in India, Virgin Mary Kumar, who, he recalled, didn't remain a virgin, and ended up marrying one of the other students. She became the inspiration for the novel's Sister Mary Joseph Praise. With this constellation of items he began to think through the plot and develop the characters, although he began to write without a plan, without knowing how it would end. The novelist John Irving scolded him, "Abraham, if you're just making it up as you go along, you're not a writer, you're an ordinary liar." Liar or not, Dr. Verghese had enough of a concept to begin writing a novel, even though he didn't have everything (such as a plot) worked out. This happens a lot in fiction writing.

Irv Yalom, a psychiatrist, wrote his novel *When Nietzsche Wept* as a type of thought experiment, the "what if" that philosophers love to entertain. He had long been interested in philosophy because "there's so much more wisdom there" than in much psychological theory. He thought it would be "a good teaching vehicle for students to learn about psychotherapy if I could take the students back to when psychotherapy began, to just the beginnings of it, let's say 1895"—when Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer published their first case study of hysteria—"and see how the field actually emerged." But he also had a second idea: "Wouldn't it be interesting if we could imagine our field if it had not been invented by someone from the medical scientific tradition but by a philosopher? By Nietzsche?" He continued:

> Imagine what might have happened if Nietzsche—who was a man who lived in great despair in his own life—could have been placed in a certain moment in history where he would have been enabled to invent a psychotherapy from his own published writings that could have been used to cure himself. That's the thought experiment that was somewhere unconsciously in my mind.

What if Nietzsche, obsessed with a woman, met Josef Breuer, Freud's early collaborator, who was also obsessed with a woman they called Anna O, who was the focus of their case study of hysteria. And what if, using Nietzsche's philosophy and Breuer's insights, they were able to cure each other of their despair. From this, psychotherapy could have been born.

Dr. Yalom uses other sources from psychotherapy as well as philosophy for his work. Patients describe strange or poignant situations or their dreams in therapy sessions. He used as an example a patient's dream:

> The dream had something to do with a man and a woman meeting and having a reunion. They were lovers when they were young and now it's fifty years later and they had arranged to meet at a certain spot. The man shows up and finally after a half hour the woman shows up. They hardly recognize one another. And they begin to have a conversation. The man says, "I've been waiting for you all these years." With the expectation that now they were going to have a reunion and get married and spend the remainder of their short times together. The woman doesn't remember that she ever said such a thing.

Or he will take a situation such as the man who lied through years of group therapy that he was highly successful in life. However, after this man suffered a terrible injury, Dr. Yalom went to the hospital, met the man's family, and discovered that his patient had been lying the whole time—that he had been covering up years of failure and misery. This left the psychoanalyst with a dilemma: should he tell the other men in the group? Several plot ideas could arise from this occurrence and from the dilemmas of telling the truth. No matter what, whether a situation such as this or someone's dream, "I feel it's incumbent on me to get the patient's permission. I will go back to the patient. They probably will have forgotten this. It's a minor thing." But he insists on getting permission, since it involves the confidential doctor-patient relationship. Tom Kealey can overhear Grandma saying she needs a mimosa, but he doesn't have to consider ethical responsibilities, doesn't need to get her consent.

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For fiction writers who also teach, the classroom can also incubate ideas, whether from the students (like Dr. Yalom's patients) or the creative mix of reading material. Adam Johnson received the Pulitzer Prize for *The Orphan Master's Son*, a fiction flowing from the mindset of North Koreans. In 2004 he taught a class on novels at Stanford. "I usually like to throw in one memoir and look at how real people in nonfiction write about their real lives versus the conventions of how writers falsify people's lives. Especially if you look at the development of the novel—they were falsified memoirs or the roots, I believe, of the novel," Johnson explained. For his class he chose to discuss *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* by Kang Chol-Hwan. "It was about Kang's nine years in Camp 15, which is Yodok in the D.P.R.K. [Democratic People's Republic of Korea]. I

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was really pretty surprised that as an informed person in California—where we compost and recycle and are aware of the world—I didn't know there was a gulag system up and running in the world":

> Yodok is the big family prison. Camp 14, 18 and Camp 15 are the family prisons. They each have fifty thousand people in them. On the other side of the world they're just waking up right now to go to work. These two camps are *Kwan-li-so* camps or irredeemable camps for the most part. You don't get sentences or trials and you work forever, pretty much. You go in with your entire family if someone in your family commits an infraction. It's called the "weed by the roots" or the three-generations rule that Kim Il-sung put in place in the early seventies: to take the infection from around the corrupted citizen, all the people surrounding him go away, as well. And that's the terror that the state uses to make families start to police one another, which I wanted to depict in the book…so I taught this book and it just led me down the wormhole.

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Johnson didn't explain why that particular memoir grabbed him as an example for a class on fiction, but the book's revelations stunned him, provoking the creation of his novel.

Emotional responses to other people's work can trigger fresh writing. Richard Rorty, the late philosopher, found it easiest to decide on a topic to write about "if there's something I have recently read that I very much like or strongly dislike. It's probably easiest for me to write if my reaction to somebody else's piece is: *Boy, is this guy absolutely wrong about that!* Then I produce hypotheses about what stupid assumption he has made that made him say this wrong thing. That gets me going. It puts me in a position to write a sustained polemic." The source text could have been so completely wrong-headed that he would have needed an essay's worth of analysis to set everything straight. Conversely, Professor Rorty also found it easiest to react "if somebody says something that strikes me as absolutely right." He could then "wax eloquent about how wonderful this guy is—how wonderfully he differs from others who have written on the same topic." In either case, there's a visceral response that ignites the fuel. "I guess I think of writing as easiest if you either hate something or love something. You can use that emotion as a springboard."

Richard Rorty was a philosopher and not a chemist or a novelist. There are lots of differences between the way an idea grows into a philosophical essay or into an entire scientific project or a novel (even if the novel jumps off of Nietzsche's or some other philosopher's ideas), just as there are differences between expository prose and poetry. Even so, the creative process crosses all boundaries—it transcends all disciplines, all modes of producing knowledge or art. Biologist Terry Root noted how her scientific process was analogous to those of many "creative" writers. "How do you come up with ideas that you're going to be tackling?" she mused. "It's more like that you stumble into them." In fact, it seems she even stumbled into biology. "My life has been serendipitous," she explained. She started off in college as a math and statistics major, yet she ended up being a biologist. Her method is to let her interest take her in any direction: "I love birds: that's how I got into biology. I'm concerned about global warming. I put the two together, and I just meander around and look at what other people are doing, get excited about what other people are doing, and go from there. I'm not on a straight and narrow trajectory at all."

Coming up with research projects on a set agenda is too rigid for Root: "If I try to force something, I don't do as well." She knew that she had the good fortune to be allowed to study birds, and she could apply that to her concerns about the changes in global climate. Her research ideas would grow from crisscrossing those interests, while her playfulness was powered by a strong ethical sense of her mission. "It's a real privilege to do what I'm able to do," she said. "I feel an obligation to pay back a bit of that to the world to work on things that are real world problems." Her fun with birds can actually help save the planet.

But just getting an idea is not enough. How do you know if it's the right idea, an idea worth the effort? "I think the best analogy is falling in love," David Henry Hwang explained with a laugh:

> You know how you fall in love with somebody and you kind of begin to be sort of obsessed with them; you get that weird chemical brain-fry and you can't stop thinking about them, you always want to be with them? It's kind of like that. The good thing about writing is that most of the time you're only working on this project for about two to three years, so you don't have to actually sustain that love, as in real life.

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Whatever gets you excited to grab the computer or pad or whatever you write on, "that's what you should be writing." Even if it doesn't work out, even if it's a failure, that idea must be pursued: "I always liked that [filmmaker] Preston Sturges called his autobiography *Between Flops*, because I think that that's the reality of the experience." But you have to fall in love with your idea to begin with, that's the key; and after that you need to be ready to fail again and again.

David Henry Hwang told me how the idea for his hit play *M. Butterfly* took shape as a drama, with its own logical trajectory. It's worth following him through the process, since it's a terrific example of how a random nub can grow into a sophisticated production, how a vague notion evolves into a complex, structured creation.

Hwang often worked by being sparked by an idea first, and then he would create a story line: "I think that you can start with an idea, start with a question, start with a theme," he explained, "and you can devise a story." In that process, he would formulate a question—"something that's bugging me, some issue, and I don't know what the answer is. I write the play to find out how it is that I really feel about it." In this case, he heard the news account first, a true story about a French diplomat who had a twenty-year affair with a Chinese actress. She turned out to be a spy and, even more shocking, a man in drag. Like so many who heard this bizarre tale, Hwang was bugged by questions: "How could the diplomat not have known the true gender of his lover? What does this all imply about gender dynamics and playing gender and race and all of that?" He had the story of the affair as a starting point, but he continued to ruminate about it for months, musing on how to turn his questions into good theater. Then it clicked:

> I was living in Los Angeles at the time, and I was driving down Santa Monica Boulevard, and I asked myself, "Well, what did this diplomat think that he'd found?" And the answer came to me, "He probably thought he'd found some version of *Madame Butterfly*." And at that point, the notion of dovetailing the events of the spy story and the plot of Puccini's opera, *Madame Butterfly*, seemed to me to be a really interesting way to tell the story.

After that flash of insight, the idea needed more structure. He compared the way he would develop a play's structure to another element of theater, his approach to developing characters: "Just to kind of get yourself going, you may base a character on somebody you know. It just sort of jump-starts the process. And if the writing's going well, and if you're really engaged with the work, very soon the character that you're writing is no longer the person that you based it on. The characters take on their own characteristics and become their own persons." In a similar way, developing a structure can also draw from models. "I tend to structurally base plays on other plays," Hwang said, explaining how his conversation with previous plays ended up evolving into an entirely new design. "For each of my plays, I can tell you what play I was imitating."

> *M. Butterfly* really borrows this sort of Peter Shaffer structure, which you see in plays like *Equus* and *Amadeus*, where you have a protagonist who comes out, who directly addresses the audience, who's at a relatively late point in his life, and who is in some sort of difficult point in his life. And he then goes

back over the events of his life as the narrator and you see these scenes come to life. That is how *Equus* works, that's how *Amadeus* works, and that's how *M. Butterfly* works.

But because of the way Hwang understands human nature, *M. Butterfly* veered away from the previous Shaffer models. He questioned the idea of someone being able to keep control of his own story. He was skeptical "about whether or not it's possible for an individual to hold on to the narrative of their whole life. I feel that at some point in our lives we tend to lose hold of our own narrative; we feel like we don't have control over it anymore." Someone else steps in to seize command, so to speak, and they tell the story instead of you, with their intentions instead of yours.

M. Butterfly diverges radically from the Shaffer structure by changing the master of the narrative. In the first act, Hwang explained, the character that steps forward and begins to address the audience at the beginning of the play is, in this case, René Gallimard, the French diplomat in China: "He has control over the narrative. But he begins, over the course of the story, to have an affair with a Chinese actress, whose name is Song Liling. So then in Act Two of the play, the two of them struggle for control of the narrative. And in the third act, the other character, Song Liling, has control over the narrative." Hwang switched the point of view drastically in the last act, completely reversing the power dynamics, drastically modifying the Shaffer structure.

Then he moved on to the next problem for this idea to take shape as a theatrical work. He needed a beginning and an end, and for that he drew upon the original Puccini opera:

> At the beginning of the play, the diplomat fantasizes that he's Pinkerton, the American Lieutenant from the opera *Madame Butterfly*, and that he has found his butterfly. And then by the end of the play, the Frenchman realizes that it's actually *he* who's the butterfly and that it's *he* who was deceived by love. And the Chinese spy who perpetrated that deceit is therefore the real Pinkerton. Once I knew that, it was relatively easy to write the play.

There's a lot more to writing a play, of course, such as creating compelling characters that speak in believable dialogue, so it's not quite *that* easy. But now that he had the idea fully articulated, he could move on to all the other elements. In the end, a small anecdote grew into a full-blown dramatic concept through a dialogue with source texts and structural models.

The trick is to throw in your line and be ready when you feel a tug. Once an idea has bitten, you have to give it play and then reel it in.

Hilton Obenzinger is a lecturer and associate director of the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University. His most recent book is *Busy Dying*, and his other works include *a*hole: a novel*, *Running through Fire: How I survived the Holocaust*, *American Palestine: Melville, Twain and the Holy Land Mania*, *Cannibal Eliot*, *Lost Histories of San Francisco*, *New York on Fire*, and *This Passover or the Next I will Never Be in Jerusalem*.

GILLIAN PEDERSON-KRAG

Rehearsal, 1991
oil on canvas, 32 x 36 in

courtesy: the artist