

'You Know, I Could Write The Most Wonderful Book'

By Barbara Goldsmith

IT happened twice in one week. At a cocktail party on Monday, a woman I'd never seen before said, "So you're the writer. You know, I could write the most wonderful book, if only I could find the time." Then on Wednesday an acquaintance called, ostensibly to invite me to a political fund-raiser. "Would you be interested in helping me with my book?" she inquired. "How?" "By writing it. I've had such a fascinating life, but I'm having a little trouble pinning it down." I had visions of myself in a New Yorker cartoon, wielding a butterfly net, chasing after episodes in her life and slapping them down on a yellow wide-lined pad. "Sorry," I said, "but I have trouble collaborating, even with myself." This is my standard reply to this query, which comes up with disconcerting regularity. The answer is meant to sound amiable, it usually works, and it masks my rage.

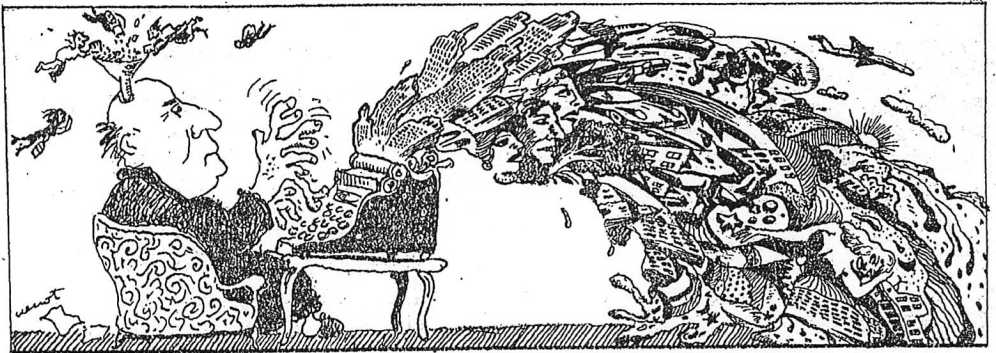
I'm not adverse to the concept of collaboration; a great many excellent books have resulted from the combination of a remarkable life and a competent writer. What's vexing, however, is the assumption that the writer serves merely as a conveyance mechanism, a conduit through which flow unfiltered, unprocessed stories.

Otherwise intelligent and sensitive individuals say the darndest things to writers. Recently the novelist and playwright James Kirkwood was pursued at a party by a woman who insisted she wanted to tell him her life story. When he said he didn't work that way, she screamed at him, "You fool, you're turning down \$2 million." Both E. L. Doctorow and John Irving correspond with prisoners who say they want to become writers. In comparing notes, the authors found their experiences were similar — the first two letters from prisoners invariably discuss the writing process; the third is usually about money — how much and how fast. Peter Maas is frequently approached by people who have read his nonfiction books and want to collaborate with him on tales of skulduggery. Mr. Maas says he tells them, "O.K. You can tell me your story, but I don't split the money. I get to keep it all." He adds, "That usually takes care of it."

Once writers move past the anger and the flip rejoinders, they can find adducible reasons why people believe a story or an idea is a book and one that will make money. Ours is an age of Pantagruelian appetites for media stimulation, which in turn produces synthetic products. In this atmosphere, the work of artistic intent and the nonbook, a manufactured item merchandised like panty hose or deodorant, are lumped together. Money — and the speed at which it can be made — has become the operative standard for success. In his latest novel, "The Color of Light," William Goldman notes that writing it took from "February 21 to Memorial Day, 1983." What possible relevance does this have except to reinforce the perception of how fast one can turn out a book, quality having nothing to do with the matter? (I'm reminded of an evening spent with Willem de Kooning, when another artist proudly boasted that he could complete a painting in 15 minutes. A thoughtful de Kooning replied, "You know, it takes me about that amount of time to have a decent bowel movement.")

Best-seller lists today contain obvious nonbooks that tell you how to do everything in the shortest possible period of time ("Thirty Days to" — "Sexual Satisfaction," "A Better Bust," "A Flatter Stomach," "Healthy Hair," "A Beautiful Bottom"). Perhaps there should also be a list to contain the recent proliferation of Cracker Jack books, those that offer prizes of cash or gold objects to the reader.

On the back of bound galleys sent by publishers to reviewers, one sometimes reads such announce-



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ments as "\$100,000 publicity, promotion and advertising campaign planned. Major author tour." A great many writers (I include myself) appear on television and in the press, marketing their books. In the process, the synthetic and the real writer present an identical appearance. We become known for our images, not our words.

Writers who excel are no different from other champions, but common sense precludes the thought that without rigorous preparation one could leap into the role of ballet dancer, Olympic skier, lawyer or surgeon. On a recent trip to the University of Michigan, Norman Mailer remarked that at about 40 he became tired of punching people who told him they could easily write a book and decided instead to point out to them that learning to write was as least as difficult as learning to play the piano.

Good writing appears to be so effortless that the fantasy that anyone can do it proliferates. Also, there may be deep-seated psychological reasons for this assumption. Freud pointed out that the appeal of fine writing is that it resonates with both the truths and the fantasies of those who are unable to write, the only difference between the writer and the non-writer being that the former "understands how to elaborate his daydreams so that they lose their essentially personal element."

The psychiatrist Ernest van den Haag observes, "The writer comes up against the misconception that he's needed only for his manual ability to translate other people's experience into words. The non-writer's illusion is, 'I am just as good, I have just as much to say, more to say, but I'm missing a few technical details.' These people feel their experience is unique, as indeed it is, but what they fail to realize is that it is not necessarily universal or relevant. The illusion that anyone can write a book is basic narcissism. The fantasy of their powers transcends reality."

The psychiatrist Theodore Rubin, however, feels that the predominant emotion behind the conviction that one's story would make a book stems from "a primal urge we all have to be remembered, not to let our lives pass unmarked." For others, the compulsion to tell their story is a quest for understanding. Throughout history we have used the narrative form to gain knowledge of the human experience and give it meaning. In fact, the word "story" can be traced to the Greek word *eidēnai*, which means to know.

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Writers are aware of why many people assume they could be writers. Tom Wolfe says, "What they are really saying is 'I have a story and I want it told.' This compulsion is what enables the journalist to get his information. It's the writer's job to flesh out the stories he hears." Kurt Vonnegut, however, doesn't want to hear anybody's ideas for books and recalls the observation of the late psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler, who pointed out, "A hack is on the constant hunt for 'ideas' for his plots or 'new angles.' The real writer is haunted by a plot which he must write out of inner necessity. He is impervious to suggestions."

There seem to be common misconceptions about the alchemy of creativity — the process that discovers immutable truths within a story or an idea and transmutes them into a work that is interesting, illuminating and has reverberations beyond itself. "I'm assaulted all the time by people who insist on telling me all kinds of stories about themselves and assuring me these accounts will make a book I'll be delirious to write," Louis Auchincloss says. "I tell them, 'I am a fiction writer. Above all, fiction must have verisimilitude.' The expression 'truth is stranger than fiction' applies. The whole Watergate affair would be incomprehensible as fiction." Saul Bellow cautions that the artist deceptively presents "apparently unmediated experiences," and John Fowles writes, "If you want to be true to life, start lying about it."

ULTIMATELY, although millions of words have been written on the subject, the public has been given little help in understanding the writing process. Few writers are adept at explaining exactly what they do, and, indeed, many do not seem to understand it themselves. William Faulkner thought of himself as a man "running along behind [his characters] with a pencil trying to put down what they say and do." Somerset Maugham wrote, "There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are." And Marianne Moore warned the writer, "Be there when the writing is going on." The late Tommy Thompson, in urging writers to get over feelings of inferiority, offered only two words of advice on how to feel professional, "Get dressed."

It is a truism that the more skillful the writing, the more invisible the act of creation. If the writer has done a competent job, his insights become so lucid and universal that they seem to belong to the reader himself. What follows, then, is the assumption that the reader could have produced them. This is, no doubt, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, why the fantasy endures that the writer merely extracts one's story as a dentist would pull out a loose tooth. One is reminded of how Michelangelo informed a man who admired one of his angel carvings that his job was not difficult, because the angel had been inside the stone all along. Michelangelo had simply set it free.

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