

WHITE PINES NORTH: HOW I WRITE, 2009

“Why do you read?”

I suspect your response is very much like mine when I’m asked why I write. Quite simply, writing is a need I can’t explain. I mean, I don’t have a choice. It’s like breathing. If I don’t write, it’s like I’m suffocating. It’s been like that since before I could spell. Mom was a single working parent, so I was on my own a lot, growing up. Plus, I had rheumatic fever and three bouts of pneumonia by the time I was five, so I spent chunks of time in bed. To amuse myself, I played with hand puppets and three china elves. I’d make up stories about them, then try to write the stories down by sounding out the letters.

Years ago, I wrote about my obsession to write in a play called *Papers*. One of the characters is a novelist. He says, “Writing is a sickness, but when it’s happening I don’t ever want to get better. I’m off in a land where all the unrelated scraps of time and event, all the meaningless odds and ends I waste my life with, have shape. Form. Substance. In my little universe, life has order. Meaning. And I’m free. When I’m with my typewriter, I can take on the world.” I still feel that. Only now I use a computer.

But what to write about? A book takes me about a year, plus rewrites. so I only work on projects that matter to me. That I care about. For instance, *Chanda’s Wars* grew out of the love and care I developed for Chanda and her family while writing *Chanda’s Secrets*. I couldn’t stop thinking about them after the book was published. At the same time, I was reading about child soldiers in the newspapers. One night I woke out of a horrible nightmare: There was a fire, Iris and Soly were kidnapped, and I was in a panic, desperate to get them back. Everything flowed from that.

Of course, Chanda’s world is very different from my own. I’m often asked

how I got into her head and those of the other characters in the book. Of course I researched -- I travelled to subSahara and went into the bush to learn about tracking and survival. I met with former child soldiers who were your age. And I spoke frequently with with the Executive to General Daillaire who led the UN forces during the Rwandan genocide. I also made sure to vet everything I wrote with multiple friends from subSahara including those whose communities have suffered insurgencies and who have worked directly with child soldiers.

I consider vetting, and the approval and support of veters, to be very important when writers' characters from different cultures: it's about ensuring respect and nuance. But the deepest secret to creating flesh and blood characters is empathy: the ability to force yourself to be brutally honest about how far you might go to achieve your goals in the worst most desperate circumstances – even if you are ashamed or horrified where that leads you.

I've traveled to over forty countries; lived through all kinds of situations, some violent and life-threatening, and have friends everywhere. What I've learned is that no matter our circumstance, under the skin we're the same. Whatever our age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or abilities, we've all felt love, hate, joy, despair, the works. Our common humanity is how we're able to understand, communicate and negotiate with each other across our differences. It's how we connect to stories and characters no matter when they were written or where they are from. This shared emotional vocabulary – lets us know that if we're brutally honest about how we might feel and act in a fictional situation, that the heartbeat of our stories will be rooted in truth.

That's one of fiction's main benefits: the development of empathy. Novels don't just increase our formal literacy: as important, they increase our *emotional* literacy. There'd be fewer problems in the world, if people would step back and imagine how they'd be feeling on the other side of an

argument. Think of it: A peace movement based on reading novels.

This approach to writing character is deeply influenced by my background in theatre: Actors always have to pretend to be someone they aren't. If you're doing Shakespeare, for instance, you may need to imagine yourself as a Danish prince, like Hamlet, an Egyptian queen like Cleopatra, or medieval Italian teens in a blood feud, like Romeo and Juliet. Talk about different backgrounds! So, suppose I'm playing Romeo. At the top of each scene, I'll ask myself: What's my situation? What do I want? What am I going to do to get it? As a writer, I ask myself the same questions for each character. It's like I'm doing a solo improv.

You'll notice that so far I haven't talked about plot. It's not because I don't think it's important. I do. In fact, to me character and plot are two sides of the same coin. How so? Well in life, we discover people's characters based on what they do. In fiction, what characters do is the plot. If you start with plot you have to ask what kind of characters would behave according to your story. If you start with character, you have ask what they're going to fight for; i.e., what's the plot. Interesting people make interesting choices; so the most interesting characters will likely have the most interesting stories. Writers who ignore character end up with bad plots because the stories don't make human sense, they're cardboard. But writers who ignore plot end up with bad characters, because human beings who do nothing are boring.

So, okay, I've said plot and character are inter-related, but what does that mean practically when I'm writing a novel? How does it affect how I work? Well, let's start with the kidnap of Soly and Iris in *Chanda's Wars*. I imagine I'm Chanda: Headstrong, devoted and loyal. I feel responsible, panicked, guilty, and overwhelmed that I've broken my promise to my dying mama to keep my young siblings safe. I'm obsessed with one goal: to get them back. What will I do to achieve it? Risk my life. That's character.

But as a writer, I know that Chanda's a city girl. She'd never survive alone in the bush. I don't want her dead, so I have to give her a partner who knows how to track, hunt, and keep her alive. Enter Nelson. His character starts as a plot necessity. But it can't end there; I have to make him real. So, now I imagine that I'm him. Why do I want to help Chanda? Because my brother was kidnapped too. And I feel guilty I never protected him from our papa. And I don't want to be shamed by the young woman I love. If she gets killed because I do nothing, how will I feel? So now the plot point (helping Chanda) grows from character. And so on, back and forth, until characters and narrative are seamless.

People frequently ask if I use an outline. I do, but I don't stick to it. It changes constantly. To me, an outline is a safety net, not a straight jacket. It's there in case I get stuck, but it never interferes with the free flow of my novel's development.

Here's how that works: Before I write a word, I spend months thinking about my characters and plot, in the way I mentioned earlier in my discussion of Nelson. I make tons of notes. When I have a clear idea of how to tell the story from beginning to end -- in other words when I have an outline -- I begin.

But once my characters start interacting, they always say and do things I never expect. At that point, I either have to stick to my plan or go where my characters take me. I've learned to trust my characters. Sometimes they lead me up blind alleys, but usually they take me places I'd never have discovered on my own. As the words fly out of my fingers onto the computer screen I find myself laughing, crying, horrified, you name it. At the end of each day, I reshape my outline and regroup.

Maybe the best way to describe my writing journey is to compare it to a road trip from Toronto to Vancouver. I have an itinerary in the glove

compartment, but I don't follow it. Instead, I make constant detours depending on the weather, my mood, and whether or not I come across an interesting side road. Sometimes I discover that a town on my route has lots to discover, and I stay a few days; other towns that I'd thought I'd like to see turn out to be washouts and I drive straight through. And hey, at the end of my trip, if Victoria seems like a better destination than Vancouver, what the heck.

I'm also frequently asked what my themes are. It's a question better put to a critic than a writer. Because like most writers, I never write to make a point or develop a theme. Instead, I let my themes grow naturally from the material. For instance, if Chanda's going to rescue Soly and Iris from a warlord, the theme of war is already in the premise without me thinking about it.

More subtly: As I was developing Nelson's character, I suddenly realized that he hangs around Chanda from the moment she arrives in Tiro because of Granny's secret plans for a pre-arranged marriage. (Granny had kept these plans a secret from me too. They weren't in my original outline at all.) In any case, this discovery made me realize that Chanda isn't just fighting a war against Mandiki. She's also fighting wars against her family, superstition, and tradition -- wars of independence -- the universal wars that all teens wage, in one form or another, in their struggle for personal identity. Bingo, while I was focused on character and narrative, the theme of war had taken flight on its own.

One last thing I'm always asked -- a personal question -- who is my greatest influence. Well, sure I have writers I admire, and mentors who'My mother. She's the bravest, smartest, most amazing person I know -- and probably the reason strong female characters come naturally to me. Mom

left my Dad when I was a baby, at a time when people didn't divorce. She worked in education; we moved where her jobs took her. There were some challenging times, but no matter what, Mom always made me feel secure. She is unconditional love made human. I am so very very grateful to have her as my parent, my friend, my guide. She taught me to be open to life, and to think for myself. I owe her everything.