

A Writer's Ten Commandments

This was written in response to a request from Raymond Lamont-Brown, editor of Writer's Monthly, who asked me for something 'full of sound, practical advice for people who in many cases are quite new to the business of writing'.

1. THOU SHALT NOT DRINK, SMOKE OR TAKE DRUGS

To be a writer you need all the brains you've got.

2. THOU SHALT NOT HAVE EXPENSIVE HABITS

A writer is born from talent and time – time to observe, to study, to think. So you can't afford to waste a single hour earning money for non-essentials. Unless you were lucky enough to be born rich, you had better be prepared to live without too many worldly goods. True, Balzac got special inspiration from running up huge debts and buying things, but most people who have expensive habits tend to fail as writers.

At the age of 24 after the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution I found myself in Canada with about fifty words of English. When it got through to me that I was now a writer without a language, I took an elevator to the top of a high building on Dorchester Street in Montreal, intending to jump. Looking down from the roof, terrified of dying but even more afraid of breaking my spine and spending the rest of my life in a wheelchair, I decided to try to become an English writer instead. In the end, learning to write in another language was less difficult than writing something good, and I lived on the edge of destitution for six years before I was ready to write *In Praise of Older Women*.

I couldn't have done it if I had cared about clothes or cars – indeed, if the only alternative I saw had not been the top of that skyscraper. Some immigrant writers I knew took jobs as waiters or salesmen to save money and create a 'financial base' for themselves before trying to make a living by writing; one of them now owns a whole chain of restaurants and is richer than I could ever be, but neither he nor the others returned to

writing. You've got to decide what is more important to you: to live well or to write well. Don't torment yourself with contrary ambitions.

3. THOU SHALT DREAM AND WRITE AND DREAM AND REWRITE

Don't let anybody tell you you're wasting your time when you're gazing into space. There is no other way to conceive an imaginary world.

I never sit down in front of a bare page to invent something. I daydream about my characters, their lives and their struggles, and when a scene has been played out in my imagination and I think I know what my characters felt, said and did, I take pen and paper and try to *report* what I've witnessed.

When I've written and typed my report I read it over and find most of what I've written is a) unclear or b) inexact or c) ponderous or d) simply could not be true. Thus the typed draft serves as a kind of critical report on what I imagined, and I go back to dream the whole thing better.

It was this way of working that made me realise, when I was learning English, that my chief problem wasn't the language but, as always, getting things right in my head.

4. THOU SHALT NOT BE VAIN

Most bad books get that way because their authors are engaged in trying to justify themselves. If a vain author is an alcoholic, then the most sympathetically portrayed character in his book will be an alcoholic. This sort of thing is very boring for outsiders. If you think you're rational, wise, good, a boon to the opposite sex, a victim of circumstances, then you don't know yourself well enough to write.

I stopped taking myself seriously at the age of 27 and since then I've regarded myself simply as *raw material*. I use myself the same way as an actor uses himself: all my characters – men and women, good and bad – are made up from myself plus observation.

5. THOU SHALT NOT BE MODEST

Modesty is an excuse for sloppiness, laziness, self-indulgence; small ambitions evoke small efforts. I never knew a good writer who wasn't trying to become a great one.

6. THOU SHALT THINK CONTINUALLY OF THOSE WHO ARE TRULY GREAT

"The works of genius are watered with its tears," wrote Balzac in *Lost Illusions*. Rejection, derision, poverty, failure, the constant struggle against one's own limitations – these are the chief events in the lives of most great artists, and if you aspire to share their fate you should fortify yourself by learning about them.

None of us has a chance to meet many many writers in person, but we can be in their company if we read their memoirs, journals and letters. Avoid biographies, though – especially dramatised biographies in the form of films or television series. Almost everything that comes to you about artists through the media is sheer bunk, written by lazy hacks who don't have the faintest notion of either art or hard work. One good example is *Amadeus*, which tries to convince you that it is easy to be a genius like Mozart and very hard to be a mediocrity like Salieri.

Read Mozart's letters instead. As for specific literature on the writing life I'd recommend Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Shaw's preface to *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, Jack London's *Martin Eden* and, above all, Balzac's *Lost Illusions*.

7. THOU SHALT NOT LET A DAY PASS WITHOUT RE-READING SOMETHING GREAT

In my teens I studied to be a conductor, and from my musical training I picked up a habit which I think is essential also for writers: *the constant, daily study of masterworks*. Most professional musicians of any standing know hundreds of scores by heart; most writers, on the other hand, have only the vaguest recollection of the classics – which is one reason why there are more skilled musicians than skilled writers. A violinist who had the technical proficiency of most published novelists would never find an

orchestra to play in. The truth is that only by absorbing perfect works, the specific ways great masters have invented to develop a theme, to construct a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter, can you possibly learn all there is to be learned about technique.

Nothing that has already been done can tell you how to do something new, but if you understand the masters' techniques, you have a better chance to develop your own. To put it in terms of chess: there hasn't yet been a grandmaster who didn't know his predecessors' championship games by heart.

Don't commit the common mistake of trying to read everything in order to be well-informed. Being well-informed will allow you to shine at parties but is absolutely no use to you as a writer. Reading a book so you can chat about it is not the same thing as understanding it. It is far more useful to read a few great novels over and over again until you see what makes them work and how the writers constructed them. You have to read a novel about five times before you can perceive its structure, what makes it dramatic, what gives it pace and momentum. Its variations in tempo and time-scale, for instance: the author describes a minute in two pages then covers two years in one sentence – why? When you've figured this out you really learned something.

Every writer will pick his own favourites from whom he thinks he can learn the most, but I strongly advise against reading Victorian novels, which are riddled with hypocrisy and bloated with redundant words. Even George Eliot wrote too much about too little. When you are tempted to overwrite, read the short stories of Heinrich von Kleist, who said more with fewer words than any other writer in the history of Western literature., with the possibly exception of Pushkin and Machado de Assis in *Epitaph of a small winner*. I read them regularly, of only a few pages at a time, along with Swift and Sterne, Shakespeare and Mark Twain. At least once a year I reread some of the works of Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Stendhal and Balzac. To my mind these 19th-century novelists were the greatest masters of prose, a constellation of

unsurpassed geniuses such as we find in music from Bach to Beethoven, and I try to learn something from them every day. This is my 'technique'.

8. THOU SHALT NOT WORSHIP LONDON / NEW YORK / PARIS

I often meet aspiring writers from out of the way places who believe that people who live in the media capitals have some special inside information about art which they do not possess. They read the review pages, watch arts programmes on television to find out what is important, what art really is, what intellectuals should be concerned about. The provincial is often an intelligent, gifted person who ends up following some glib journalist's or academic's notion of what constitutes literary excellence and betrays his talent by aping morons whose only talent is for getting on.

Even if you live at the back of beyond, there is no reason for you to feel out of touch. If you have a good paperback library of great writers, and if you keep re-reading them, you will have access to more secrets of literature than all the culture phonies who set the tone in the big cities. I knew a leading New York critic who has never read Tolstoy and is proud of it too. So don't waste time worrying about what is the declared fashion, the right subject or the right style or what sorts of things win prizes. Literary fashions change as fast as the length of skirts. The only way not to be left behind is to stick to yourself. Anybody who ever succeeded in literature did so on his own terms.

9. THOU SHALT WRITE TO PLEASE THYSELF

No writer has ever managed to please readers who were not on approximately his own level of general intelligence, who did not share his basic attitude to life, death, sex, politics, and money. Playwrights are lucky: with the help of actors, they can broaden their appeal beyond the circle of kindred spirits. Yet only a couple of years ago I read the most condescending reviews in the American papers for *Measure for Measure* – the play itself, not the production! If Shakespeare can't please everyone, why should you even try?

This means there is no point in forcing yourself to be interested in something that bores you. When I was young I wasted a lot of time trying to describe clothes and furniture. I didn't have the slightest interest in clothes or furniture but Balzac had a passionate interest in them which he managed to communicate even to me while I was reading him, so I thought I had to master the art of writing exciting paragraphs about cupboards if I was ever to become a good novelist. My efforts were doomed and used up all my enthusiasm for what I had been trying to write about in the first place.

Now I only write about what interests me. I don't look for subjects: whatever it is that I can't stop thinking about – that is my subject. Stendhal said that literature is *the art of leaving out*, and I leave out everything that doesn't strike me as important. I describe people only in terms of their actions, statements, thoughts, feelings, which have shocked/mystified/amused/ delighted me in myself or others.

It isn't easy, of course, to stick to what you really care about; we would all like to be thought of as people who are curious about everything. Who ever attended a party without faking interest in something? But when you write you have to resist the temptation, and when you read over what you have written, you must always ask yourself, "Does this really interest me? Do I really care about it?"

If you please yourself – your *real* self, not some fanciful notion of yourself as the noblest of persons who cares only about the starving children of Africa – then you have a chance to write a book that will please millions. This is so because no matter who you are, there are millions of people in the world who are more or less like you. But no one wants to read a novelist who doesn't really mean what he writes. The trashiest bestseller has one thing in common with a great novel: they are both *authentic*.

10. THOU SHALT BE HARD TO PLEASE

Most new books that I read seem to me half-finished. The writer was satisfied to get things more or less right, and then moved on to something new. For me writing becomes really exciting when I go back to a chapter a couple of months after I've done with it. At that stage I look at it not so much as the author but as a reader – and no matter how often I rewrote the chapter originally, I can still find sentences which are vague, adjectives which are inexact or redundant. Indeed I find whole scenes which though true add nothing to my understanding of the characters or the story, and so can be deleted.

It is at that stage that I ponder the chapter long enough to learn it by heart – I recite it word-for-word to anyone who is willing to listen – and if I cannot remember something, I usually find that it wasn't right. Memory is a good critic.