Finding Your Voice

One of the questions that's been driving me of late is, "Just what the hell *is* an author's voice and how does he find it and what does he do with it once he has it? Does it make smoothies? Can you shout a dragon out of the sky like in **Skyrim**? Would you eat it with a goat, would you eat it in a boat?" So, I figured I'd take to the Bloggery Zone and see if I couldn't conjure 25 things I think about a writer and his voice.
Behold my insipid majesty on the subject:

1. ONE WORD: "STYLE"

The traditional definition of a writer's "voice" is, simply put, that writer's chosen style. "John Q. Snarlmonkey writes with snark and panache, using tons of ellipses and lots of capital letters and made-up words. *I love Snarlmonkey's voice*." Voice equals style. That's the easy answer.

2. EXCEPT, OKAY, FINE, IT'S SO MUCH MORE THAN THAT

Seriously, fuck easy answers. Easy answers are for babies and oxygen-starved kittens. A writer's voice is an incomprehensible and largely indefinable combo-pack of — well, of just about anything. Style, dialogue, tropes, themes, genres, sub-genres, ideas, characters, stereotypes, archetypes, word choice, grammatical violations, and so forth. Anybody who tells you that David Foster Wallace's voice does *not* include his obsession with footnotes should be shoved into a cannon and fired into the mouth of a great white shark. Voice is not one thing. Is is, in fact, the summation of a writer.

3. REVISED DEFINITION, THEN

The writer's voice is the thing that marks the work as a creation of that writer and that writer*only*. You read a thing and you say, "This could not have been written by anybody else." *That* is voice.

4. THAT MAKES IT YOURS, WHICH MAKES IT AWESOME

If you believe that old chestnut, no original stories exist and every character is just a remix of another character who came before. Maybe true, maybe not. What the fuck do I know? I'm a writer, which is another way of saying, "Makes poor life decisions." What I *do* know, however, is that a writer gets to own her voice. It's hers and hers alone. It is her fingerprint, her retinal scan, her indelible and never-replicable identity. The craft of being an author is knowing all the elements that go into a good story. But the art, ahhh, the art is in the arrangement. And that arrangement embodies your voice. How can you not love that?

5. SOMETIMES VOICE DEFIES PENMONKEY LAW

I'm just going to say this: sometimes a writer's voice breaks The Rules, capital T, capital R. A writer makes certain stylistic choices and those choices may be objectively incorrect. That may — key word: *may* — be one of the strands of memetic material that runs through the DNA of an author's voice.

6. DON'T MISTAKE BAD WRITING FOR GOOD VOICE

That being said, bad writing is bad writing. Any stylistic hangnails should be minor and made with full awareness of why they need to exist: don't write like a shit-heel and call it part of your writer's voice. Crap writing is indefensible. Try to pull that one over on a seasoned editor and they will stab you in the gonads with a red pen. And you will have deserved it.

7. YOU CAN'T FORCE IT

Forcing your voice is a futile endeavor. Like trying to hammer a cat through a mousehole (which is totally not some weird new sex move, by the way — UNLESS IT IS). Voice is a component of practice and maturity. Same way you can't concentrate really hard to make puberty come earlier ("Grow, pubes, grow!"), you cannot artificially and prematurely discover your voice. Writers must cultivate patience (or perhaps patience's rude and grumpy cousin, *stubbornness*). You'll get there. Your voice will come.

8. "IT'S A TRICK. GET AN AXE."

You can try to trick your voice into appearing early, try to overwrite or use purple prose or engage in stylistic flourishes that plum don't belong. Don't bother. It's just peeing with someone else's dick — it'll feel weird and alien, like some critical component does not belong.

9. WE FIRST MUST MIMIC

When you first start writing, you write like those writers you read most frequently. Maybe you mean to. Maybe it's an unconscious thing. But don't fight it. It's all part of the process.

10. OTHER AUTHORS ARE SPUN INTO OUR DNA

Eventually we stop miming the style of others, but along the way we still break off parts of other authors and graft them to our own styles. Some parts must be kept. No harm in that — we shouldn't be upset with our influences. Why turn away from those who got us here? Those whose voices mattered most? As long as their voice does not take over our own, we're good. It's okay if we are in part the culmination of other voices. Like I said before: the art is in the arrangement.

11. THIS SHIT TAKES A LONG TIME

You don't find your voice overnight. It doesn't just appear like the fucking Tooth Fairy. I don't know that it's a function of time or a function of how much you write or some mutant hybrid of each, but it's a slow discovery. You'll catch glimpses of it once in a while, and you'll cultivate it without even meaning to — and then, one day, it's like, boom. Your balls drop and there it is: your voice. Or, if you're a girl, your… vagina blooms? I don't know what happens with your lady-parts, having none myself. I should get a set, just to see.

12. EVOLUTION AND MUTATION

Your writer's voice, like your real voice, changes. One day you're all fresh-and-squeaky, and then calendar pages whip off the wall and suddenly your voice is scratchy and dry like you've been gargling watch parts and cigarette butts for the last ten years. Read any given author over a period of time and you see this — you can witness the Auteur Theory in action as their voice squirms and shifts.

13. BEWARE THE CARDBOARDIZATION OF YOUR WORK

Some will try to beat your voice back, like they're thwacking a tiger with an umbrella in order to urge him back into the bush. (Also not a weird new sex move.) Again, if you're confusing *bad writing* with *good voice*, okay, fine, let others — be they agents or editors or readers — judge your voice and find it wanting. But also beware what happens when they want to milk your words of what makes them special in order to make something more marketable. Your voice is one of the strongest and most complicated weapons in your arsenal. Do not give it up without a fight. Poll your intestinal flora. Check your gut. You'll know.

14. NOT JUST HOW YOU WRITE, BUT WHO YOU ARE

We assume voice to be a thing built of technical components. That's it, but only part of it. Your voice is also who you are. How you bleed and spit and scream on the page. You are your voice. Your voice is you.

15. THE SEXY TANGO OF HONESTY AND AUTHENTICITY

Be honest. Be forthright. Be authentic. You believe things. You know things. You question things. All this crazy shit needs to spill out of your head and end up on the page and in that — in the choices you make, choices that come from questions only you could've ever asked — your voice will bloom. Like a vagina. A blooming, fragrant vagina. I might be confusing "vaginas" with "flowers" again.

16. WHAT YOU ADD VERSUS WHAT YOU SUBTRACT

It's easy to suggest that a writer's voice is what's there when you write unbidden, unrestrained by the shackles of grammar or good taste or, y'know, *sobriety*. But your voice is not only a summation of those things you let out the door — it's also a calculation configuring those doors you keep closed. It's about subtracting as well as adding — pruning as well as cultivating. Voice can be a matter of writing small just as easily as it can measure the boldness of your stroke. HA HA HA STROKE MASTURBATION um, nothing.

17. LOOK TO YOUR BODY OF WORK, SEE THE VOICE EMERGE

Voice is not just the result of a single sentence or paragraph or page. It's not even the sum total of a whole story. It's all your work laid out across the table like the bones and fossils of an unidentified carcass.

18. LISTEN TO YOUR VOICE — NO, I MEAN YOUR ACTUAL VOICE

There lurks an intimate connection between the written word and the spoken word. We pretend it's not true, as if the written word is somehow higher up in the food chain, somehow more*exalted*, but that's a big brass bucket brimming with bullshit. Language exists initially to communicate from person to person — it is born of speech and sound. Words aren't just symbols: they're really how we *say* things. And so it is that your actual voice matters in this regard. Listen to what you say and how you say things: your authorial voice lurks in this. You should endeavor to write at least in part how you speak. By doing that, you capture the essence of how you say things. Related: always read your work out loud.

19. THE BANSHEE'S SCREAM

Voice matters. Voice is important. But at the end of the day, if it takes your story and drowns it in a hot stockpot of scalding soup, then you've done yourself a disservice. In the Great Cosmic Chain Of Telling Bad-Ass Motherfucking Stories, voice is subservient to story, not vice versa. Voice helps you tell the story at the same time story helps you find your voice. But no matter what, story is the pinnacle, the zenith, the apogee, and other words that mean the "tippy-top" of the narrative mountain.

20. REGULAR LIKE A MORNING CONSTITUTIONAL

Consistency in voice matters. It should day to day, page after page, hold together. The only way this fails is if you're uncertain. If you lose your shit. If you freak the fuck out.

21. DON'T PANIC

Breathe easy. Loosen your mind sphincter. Don't panic. It's like with sex — think too much and too hard about it, you'll short circuit a synapse and put the kibosh on the mood. Serenity serves the writer's voice.

22. WHERE WRITER'S BLOCK IS BORN, SCREAMING AND KEENING

I wonder if writer's block is actually a thing born of not yet knowing your voice. If we're here to assume that part of a writer's voice is knowing what to say and how to say it, then *not* being sure of — or comfortable *with* — one's voice would lead to the fear that spawns the poorly-named writer's block. It seems sensible. Then again, so did running through that Arby's naked last night, sauced to the gills on ecstasy and wine coolers. Maybe I'm not the best guy to listen to on what's sensible.

23. EVENTUALLY YOU STOP BEING AFRAID OF YOURSELF

Writers are at the outset a scared species. It's not our fault: we're told that it's a bad idea and unless we want to prepare for a life lived inside a palatial piano crate we should just buckle down and become accountants. And so I think there's a lot of bad psychic voodoo that clogs the works, and until we start to clear that out, it's really hard to find out who we are on the page and what our voice looks and sounds like. Finding your voice is then synonymous with losing the fear of not just writing but of *being* a writer.

24. THE CONFIDENCE GAME

Confidence is key. I'll say no more than that: *confidence is key*.

25. DON'T WRITE LIKE ANYBODY ELSE

At the end of the day, take the opportunity to write like you want to write. Actually, it's weirder and deeper than that — what I really mean is, write like you *need* to write. Your voice might be a component of confidence, but it also might be an accumulation of obsessions and foibles and fears and frailties and all the crazy moon-unit shit that makes us who we are. I'm going to quote from another **terribleminds** commenter, found last week at "**25 Things Writers Should Stop Doing (Right Fucking Now)**" — Amy Severson said: "When I finally realized that I was never going to write like the the authors I loved and just started writing how (and what) I wanted to, it was like someone blew out the little candle I was huddled under and flipped the switch on a dozen spotlights." I think that says it all about a writer's voice, don't you?

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THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO WRITING BETTER THAN YOU NORMALLY DO.

BY COLIN NISSAN

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WRITE EVERY DAY

Writing is a muscle. Smaller than a hamstring and slightly bigger than a bicep, and it needs to be exercised to get stronger. Think of your words as reps, your paragraphs as sets, your pages as daily workouts. Think of your laptop as a machine like the one at the gym where you open and close your inner thighs in front of everyone, exposing both your insecurities and your genitals. Because that is what writing is all about.

DON'T PROCRASTINATE

Procrastination is an alluring siren taunting you to Google the country where Balki from Perfect Strangers was from, and to arrange sticky notes on your dog in the shape of hilarious dog shorts. A wicked temptress beckoning you to watch your children, and take showers. Well, it's time to look procrastination in the eye and tell that seafaring wench, "Sorry not today, today I write."

FIGHT THROUGH WRITER'S BLOCK

The blank white page. El Diablo Blanco. El Pollo Loco. Whatever you choose to call it, staring into the abyss in search of an idea can be terrifying. But ask yourself this; was Picasso intimidated by the blank canvas? Was Mozart intimidated by the blank sheet music? Was Edison intimidated by the blank lightbulb? If you're still blocked up, ask yourself more questions, like; Why did I quit my job at TJ Maxx to write full-time? Can/should I eat this entire box of Apple Jacks? Is *The Price is Right* on at 10 or 11?

LEARN FROM THE MASTERS

Mark Twain once said, "Show, don't tell." This is an incredibly important lesson for writers to remember; never get such a giant head that you feel entitled to throw around obscure phrases like "Show, don't tell." Thanks for nothing, Mr. Cryptic.

FIND YOUR MUSE

Finding a really good muse these days isn't easy, so plan on going through quite a few before landing on a winner.

Beware of muses who promise unrealistic timelines for your projects or who wear wizard clothes. When honing in on a promising new muse, also be on the lookout for other writers attempting to swoop in and muse-block you. Just be patient in your search, because the right muse/human relationship can last a lifetime.

HONE YOUR CRAFT

There are two things more difficult than writing. The first is editing, the second is expert level Sudoku where there's literally two goddamned squares filled in. While editing is a grueling process, if you really work hard at it, in the end you may find that your piece has fewer words than it did before. Which, is great. Perhaps George Bernard Shaw said it best when upon sending a letter to a close friend, he wrote, "I'm sorry this letter is so long, I didn't have time to make it shorter." No quote better illustrates the point that writers are very busy.

ASK FOR FEEDBACK

It's so easy to hide in your little bubble, typing your little words with your little fingers on your little laptop from the comfort of your tiny chair in your miniature little house. I'm taking this tone to illustrate the importance of developing a thick skin. Remember, the only kind of criticism that doesn't make you a better writer is dishonest criticism. That, and someone telling you that you have weird shoulders.

READ, READ, READ

It's no secret that great writers are great readers, and that if you can't read, your writing will often suffer. Similarly, if you can read but have to move your lips to get through the longer words, you'll still be a pretty bad writer. Also, if you pronounce "espresso" like "expresso."

STUDY THE RULES, THEN BREAK THEM

Part of finding your own voice as a writer is finding your own grammar. Don't spend your career lost in a sea of copycats when you can establish your own set of rules. If everyone's putting periods at the end of their sentences, put yours in the middle of words. Will it be incredibly difficult to read? Yes it will. Will it set you on the path to becoming a literary pioneer? Tough to say, but you're kind of out of options at this point.

KEEP IT TOGETHER

A writer's brain is full of little gifts, like a piñata at a birthday party. It's also full of demons, like a piñata at a birthday party in a mental hospital. The truth is, it's demons that keep a tortured writer's spirit alive, not Tootsie Rolls. Sure they'll give you a tiny burst of energy, but they won't do squat for your writing. So treat your demons with the respect they deserve, and with enough prescriptions to keep you wearing pants.