



## Recipe for Primeval Soup

By Nick Hershenow  
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Generally I'm at a loss when asked to explain what I'm doing as a writer. The most straightforward and reasonable questions throw me: what's your book about? What's your method? Do you write from an outline? How do you develop plot and characters? Hearing my stammering, unsatisfactory answers to such questions, even I start to question my legitimacy.

But I have written one novel and am far enough along on a second to believe that it too may well become a book, and lately I've been thinking I might even have a method. It goes something like this:

There's no single beginning point that I can distinguish, but more of a kind of primeval soup of situations, people, ideas, and images plucked from my life. Notebooks gradually fill with recollections and musings; random bits of conversation; a phrase I read somewhere; rough and tentative outlines. There's no real story yet, and few connections. I don't know how to start so I just keep filling the notebooks, ransacking my life for material and awkwardly trying to force some link between the disparate pieces.

But at some point the primeval soup begins to bubble. Those random juxtapositions trigger mutations; tentative connections are made. They multiply and strengthen, and a fictional dream begins to take shape. I find myself living a double life, a double agent. Living in the world like a normal person, but all the time quietly extracting things from it, observing and describing and converting it into a dream. And simultaneously living in that dream, which, now taking on its own life, no longer requires so many pieces of mine.

The primeval soup metaphor breaks down. Shift to the sculpture metaphor: I've got this unformed mass of material, and I'm alternately carving at it and slapping new material on, beginning to perceive a form. It's ugly and messy but nevertheless I work pieces of it down to finer and finer detail, in the hope that something of beauty will emerge and point the way to the larger, still hidden form. Though I may end up with some intricately carved appendage that's attached to no purpose to the main body, and I'll have no choice but to break it off and rework it into something else.

Forget the sculpture metaphor. This is more like an excavation. I start out digging shallow and wide, so that later I can go deeper and more focused. Going into a pit, which has dark, unpleasant connotations for most people but not for miners or archaeologists, for whom going into a pit always carries some hope of illumination.

What if I strip away these shields of metaphor and consider the thing at face value? All those notebooks with their fractured passages and half-formed, half-blind characters muddling about; the constantly revised keys and outlines; the cascade of proliferating

computer files. By many standards such an enterprise could be judged mad, or at best ill-advised, and who wants to argue with such a judgment? It may well prove mad, never quite coalescing, the dream too rife with contradiction and disconnection to hold anyone's attention for long. Of course, I can always point to the fine line that separates madness from genius, though if I ever succeed in convincing myself or anyone else that this is genius I'd do well to remember that line.

But to hell with this self-conscious second-guessing. The novel, the dream life, is alive, shifting metaphors and mutating and forming its synapses and spreading its rhizomes everywhere. It needs as much of my attention as my waking life can spare.

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