



On Remodeling the Writing Factory

By Ryan Blacketter
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When I started writing ten years ago, I had the discipline of a German factory foreman. Every morning at six, I leapt into my work boots and began slapping keys, writing in furious labor seven, eight, ten hours, breaking only to smoke, gulp coffee, and brood. I shouted at sentences, as if the words were lazy employees. Of course, the more I abused the words on the page, the more they refused to function, and the door to creativity was often locked.

Now and then, as if against my will, I slipped into the gentle trance of art. But much of my time was spent in this factory, noisy with the clatter of machines, the sound of will, ambition, and control. I worked in frustrated insistence that a convincing world appear on the page *now*. It's a miracle such a "work ethic" finally produced a book. There was a price to clocking hours in a cold, noisy place: prematurely gray hair, two near-breakdowns, and a constant scowl.

My sanity required a change. When I began my second book eight months ago, I altered my work habits. The new, calmer method is more promising, and it's certainly more fun.

Now when I sit down to work, I don't touch the keys for thirty minutes or so. I sip coffee and look out the window—waiting, listening, sitting still. The factory in my head knows I've come to work, and it'll wake to the task in due time. There's no hurry, no

clock to punch anymore. The tools are silence, calm, patience. I trust the unconscious to do its slow work. Soon the factory lights flicker on, the conveyor belts rattle to motion. I begin to glimpse pieces of my deepest self riding the belts, memories, hallucinations: a sun-faded beachball, a package of cellophane-wrapped hamburger, a snapshot of my father barbecuing.

When I'm in that deeper place, I begin to write. Soon recognizable shapes appear on the page. The gray, still world begins to turn, colors emerge. The puppets stand and walk, moving and talking like people.

I'd like to say my writing comes faster now, that this slowness has accelerated my production. But that would be more bottom-line nonsense. What's needed is better work, not faster production. And in literature, better means truer. The real world spins too fast to see it clearly at first glance. Since the best of us humans are half-blind, groping creatures, we simply can't conjure a true world on the page *now*. A page a day! A book a year! Ten easy plots! I leave assembly-line writing to the hacks.

Literary writers need a quiet place and lots of time to decide the simplest of things. *Is this bright beachball of my childhood a sweet, nostalgic thing? Is it an object of menace? Both at once?* Who cares if I look ridiculous lying on my back in the yard tossing a child's ball in the air when I should be at some job. Let the rest of the country speed circles in their forklifts and Hummers. I'm done rushing.

I still go to the factory and work hard every day. Good writing needs form and shape, hard work, discipline. But I've remodeled my factory. There are new windows, which let in the sun. The machines are fixed to work at a slow, comfortable speed. I'm a kind foreman, and it's a good job. The only rule is that I have to sit in the chair during

operating hours, yet I get to stare into space whenever I feel like it. Stretch my legs out.

Dream, think, feel—and enjoy the work.

Ryan Blacketter will teach “High Risk Fiction: A Writing Workshop” at The Cabin this fall. Please see the listing under “Classes” in this issue.