

## AN ECHO TO THE SENSE

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*True ease in writing comes from art, not chance{PRIVATE }  
As those move easiest who have learned to dance  
Tis not enough no harshness gives offense  
The sound must seem an echo to the sense.*

Alexander Pope  
An Essay on Criticism

"... *An echo to the sense.*"

When I read those words, I think of my favorite writers, the ones who make me feel the things they write, whose stories not only entertain me, but make me understand something fundamental about both the word and myself. Writers who make me think: "Yes, she understands, she *knows*."

When I read those words, I think of the writer's voice.

What is voice? Briefly, voice is the single most important thing a writer can bring to her work. Voice is what tells the reader who you are, it tells them that what you say is important. It is personal and individual, the spirit, the intellect and the vision. It is the genius of the writer and the controlling consciousness of the book.

Sound complicated?

It isn't. If you want to know what voice is, open an anthology of short stories or novellas by various authors. Look at the page layout, the way the words arrange themselves. Look at the white space.

Now, read bits and pieces of each author's work. Anthologies are usually linked by a common theme; notice that although all the stories reflect that theme, they all explore it in a different way. They all *sound* different.

This is voice.

Voice is what words sound like in your head, how your sentences fall on the page, the rhythms you hear. We all hear things differently, just as we all see things differently. Ask a group of people to look at the same scene, and then ask each of them to describe it. Each person's description will be unlike another's. Probably, those descriptions will bear little resemblance to what you viewed yourself.

Your voice is unique. It is the product of everything you've experienced, everything you've read and all the ways you think. Where and when you grew up, your socioeconomic background, your education, your family view, and your religion, all play a part in determining your voice. So does the language you speak. Irving Howe, in *The Critic's Notebook*, says "Any language persuades its speakers to see the universe in certain ways, to the exclusion of other ways. It thereby limits the possibilities of choice for any writer."

Voice is like that too. The choices you make as a writer are never accidental; you make them based on how you think and how you've been trained. You see the universe in a certain way "*to the exclusion of other ways.*" Whatever it is that made you want to write, whatever it is you want to say—that is your voice.

Voice manifests itself in theme. Each of us has a central theme, something we want to explore, our own "hot button," if you will. Look at the writers you know, and see if you can find the central theme that runs through their work. Kristin Hannah writes about rebirth in some form or another in every one of her books, Laura Kinsale about redemption. Susan Elizabeth Phillips explores finding and empowering yourself.

These themes come from your own life, they are the demons that haunt you, your angels. They

are your personal vision, and they give you your voice.

How important is voice? How often have you heard an editor say, "We're looking for new voices." Publishers love to tout new "finds" as new "voices." Reviewers nearly fell over themselves trying to adequately describe the profound voices of the two newest literary phenoms of our time: David Guterson (*Snow Falling on Cedars*), and Charles Frazier (*Cold Mountain*). For Pam Houston's *Cowboys are my Weakness*, the "Los Angeles Times" said, "[Her] voice is wholly formed and perfect." Of Donna Tartt (*The Secret History*), the "Boston Globe" said, "Tartt's voice is unlike that of any of her contemporaries." Mona Simpson (*Anywhere But Here*) "joins those female literary stars—Colette, Willa Cather—whose voices are uniquely recognizable, always their own." ("Vogue").

The quality of a writer's voice tells the reader how much time to invest in them, whether or not to believe them. Reviewers said of Theresa Weir (*Cool Shade*), "[Her stories are] Poignant, powerfully gripping, with truths that cut to the bone." ("**Rendezvous**"). Read it again: "Truths that cut to the bone." She knows what she's talking about, the universality of the emotions she writes about has the strength to touch us all. Whether or not Ms. Weir has actually experienced those emotions doesn't matter; *she makes us believe that she has*.

Read the first line of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (if you haven't already, read the whole thing!): "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."

Not only does Austen speak with the voice of authority, that first line sets the theme for the entire book, as well as showing the irony and wit that make it not just a profound reading experience, but an exploration of universal emotions and societal roles that still grips readers more than a century after she wrote it. That, my friends, is voice.

We all have a unique voice, a unique philosophy. The real question is: How do we find it?

It would be easy to assume that because your voice is an extension of yourself, because it consists of *your* vision, it would come naturally to you. But like speaking, searching for that voice takes time. It is not something you come out of the womb knowing how to do (unfortunately).

Your own voice may not be the first one that comes to you. Because your voice is based on influences you've had throughout your life, it's usually derivative. My first major writing influences were the Caddie Woodlawn stories, and Anya Seton. My first attempt at a novel was a direct recreation of *Katherine*. Other authors whose style snuck into my work at various times were Mary Stewart, John Jakes, Ursula LeGuin. I read Tolkien probably a million times, but, unlike the others, his style never influenced mine. The authors I imitated I had a natural affinity for.

Which brings me to the first way to find your voice.

Try imitation.

What, you say? Imitate! But I thought I was supposed to find my own voice!

Yes, of course. One of the easiest ways to define your own style is to imitate someone else. (Lest I risk an onslaught of angry letters regarding plagiarism, note here that I am telling you to do this only in writing exercises, and to *imitate*, not *copy*. These exercises are not meant for publication).

Imitating an experienced and favorite author will tell you when something feels natural or unnatural. You'll learn the limitations of other writers—how does their style limit you in getting across what you want to say? How is it freeing? Those discoveries will help you uncover new aspects of your own writing. There are a few caveats here: this only works if the authors you imitate are good and if they are appropriate to your subject matter and aspirations—in other words, don't imitate another century. The melodramatic and sentimental affectations of other eras will immediately date you. Keep in mind also, that writing like Hemingway probably won't do much to win you a career in historical romance, though it *will* help you become a better writer. As in all things, moderation is the key.

Try this exercise. Pick a passage from an author you admire. Now, write an example imitating the author's style—not necessarily the topic or the mood. Remember, you're using your own vision here. The words you're choosing are your own, as well as what you choose to write about. The style alone is what you're mimicking.

This simple act of imitation requires you to make a choice. Your first decision is: What will I write about? How does that single choice come from what you know about the world and yourself? Your second decision is: What words will I use? Words are evocative, they have force and hidden meanings. The words you use will be different from the words anyone else will choose.

Don't believe me? Try this: Do this imitative exercise with two or three other writers. Compare the paragraphs you've written. You'll see at a glance that, even though you've all imitated the same author's

style, your paragraphs are distinctly different. Notice the individual choices each writer made. Even if you all picked the same subject to write about, not a single sentence will be the same.

Instinctively, you already know this. How often have you grimaced because you read a review of a book that sounds exactly like the one you're working on—and then read the book only to realize how very different it is? One of my writer friends and I joke often about how we tend to write about the same themes—and even the same situations—yet we could not write like each other to save our souls. At a writing seminar I once attended, the teacher asked everyone in the room to write a story about a woman sitting at a bar in a red dress. Among eighty students, not a single page about that woman was the same.

Imitating other writers is one way to understand your own voice. When imitation becomes restraining, when you start to yearn for different rhythms and chaff at the limitations, when you understand what it means to rework a sentence over and over again and that the first choice is not necessarily the right choice, then it's time to refine your own voice.

The power of voice is reflected in these questions: What Point-of-View do I use? Which characters' sensibility most helps me illustrate my theme? How will I utilize grammar? How do I want the piece to look and feel? Am I a lyrical writer or one who prefers the energy of short, crisp sentences?

Know the difference between the denotative and connotative meanings of words. Make those meanings your own. One of my favorite programs is "**Inside the Actor's Studio**" on the Bravo channel. On the show, the host interviews actors, directors and screenwriters. I've learned a great deal about the creative process from this program, and how similar it is for everyone. But one of the most useful things I've taken from it is a list of questions the host asks each guest at the end of the program. Among the questions are: "What is your favorite word?", "What is your least favorite word?", "What is your favorite drug—and it need not be chemical?"

Alec Baldwin answered that last question with "My wife," and taught me forever and forever how powerful are the responses that push beyond the literal, how they are intensely individual, products of both voice and vision.

Look at this simile from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "Ladies bathed before noon, after their three o'clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum." After reading this, do you have any doubt of the power of a writer's experience in creating time, place and mood? Could anyone but Harper Lee write a sentence like this?

How about this one, from Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*: "[Marriage] was not the safe anchorage he had been taught to think but a voyage on uncharted seas." Edith Wharton lived in a world where the most common way to travel long distances was by ship. Her experiences are not only reflected in her own, strong voice, but they give a strength to the metaphor that makes it emotionally universal.

Jayne Ann Krentz talks about utilizing myths and legends that tap into deep cultural currents. The Beauty and Beast myth, the Man from the Past, the Mysterious Stranger ... The legends you choose to a large extent define your voice. Again, these are your personal themes, your own mythologies. The choices you make come from the person you are and the writer you want to be.

Refine your voice by refusing to turn away from experience. Discover and analyze your own "hot buttons," the things that move you. Don't be afraid to pull from your deepest emotional experiences. Dorothy Allison, in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, drew upon her own history of child abuse and poverty to write a distinctly powerful book. But the old adage "Write what you know," has more to do with the emotions you understand than in actual physical experience. In order to write about death, it's not necessary to have experienced it firsthand—but it is vital that you understand the nature of loss and grief.

Listen to conversations (without getting arrested), watch people. Read widely, allow yourself lots of influences. There is no better way to refine your voice than by understanding what other writers have done. Allow movies, books, paintings, poetry, television to find their way into your works. The more you see, the more you understand that there is nothing new in the world, that everything has already been done. This is so freeing. It allows you to be afraid of nothing but the challenge. Nothing you can do is "wrong." In an interview with "**Writer's Digest**," John Jakes once said: "Originality does not consist of saying what has never been said before; it consists of saying what you have to say." Again, *voice*.

Practice makes voice. If you write long enough, you will begin to "hear" your voice. You will know instinctively if something is not right. In the past, I never read romance while I was writing it because I was too afraid of other influences sneaking into my work. Now, I am so sure of the power and strength of my own voice, that those influences feel "wrong," and I know instantly if I've strayed from my own path.

Expect to be in love with words while you're learning, to resist editing. Eventually, you'll begin to see when affectation is at the expense of true emotion, when the rhythm of a sentence overwhelms its

meaning, when the beauty of a description is simply a need to be poetic that contributes nothing to the story. Experiment with form. Know that the more you limit yourself, the more you set yourself free. Take a paragraph from a book and rewrite it as poetry (iambic pentameter, free verse, a rondele-you decide). Write a character sketch through the eyes of a pet. Limits challenge the mind by forcing creativity. On my refrigerator, I have blocks of "Magnetic Poetry." When I'm blocked, I play around with it, and it has never failed to inspire me (or, for that matter, my husband. His poetry tends to the obscene; I keep telling him it's his writer's voice dying to break free).

Voice is your vision, it is your emotional truth, the way you put a sentence on the page, the rhythm of your paragraphs. What it is *not* is the voice of your *characters*.

You may have to adjust the *words* you use in writing a character. For example, in my latest book, *The Way Home*, my heroine was uneducated. She couldn't read. I was careful, for the most part, to use words that were appropriate for her character whenever I wrote her dialogue or her point-of-view narrative. In my third book, *The Portrait*, both characters were highly educated members of the *literati* in New York. Their dialogue and narrative reflected that.

But though the characters's voices changed, my own writer's voice did not. The themes I explored were still products of my vision, the sentence rhythms and structure were essentially the same, my dark and dismal view of the world didn't vary.

For an example of this from a true master, look to Mark Twain. Read a chapter from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, then read from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. On the surface, these boys could not be more different. Tom was an educated boy. He writes in third person, with bigger words and a more distant tone. This is a boy who can write down his thoughts. Now look at Huck Finn. Huck is uneducated, he comes from a long line of oral storytellers, and the narrative reflects that.

But the essential Mark Twain has not changed. His humor is still there, his view of boyhood is the same. His philosophy runs strong through each book, making these works uniquely Mark Twain's, even though the characters are different. Mark Twain's voice is undiluted. The only change has been in the voice of the characters.

Finally, I have two words of advice for you.

Be patient.

Eventually, you will find that thing that sets you apart from every other writer, and with it will come the confidence that comes from knowing you are truly in control. You will find an ability to critique your own work with a scalpel instead of a broadaxe, and you will begin to recognize when an editor or fellow critiquer's criticisms are dead on or completely off the mark. And, even better, you will know what to do about it.

"... *an echo to the sense.*"

A true voice, a brilliant voice. It's yours for the taking. All you have to do is discover it

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