Making an Elephant

Writing from Within

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Published by Picador

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First published 2009 by Picador
an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-45101-7

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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Introduction

This book began as no more than the collection of pieces of occasional non-fiction, published or unpublished, that writers of fiction are sometimes tempted to put together, but in the course of assembling it I've tried to thread the pieces in a way that generally offers, to borrow a phrase of Kipling's, 'something of myself'.

I've often stated—one or two such statements are revisited in these pages—that in my fiction I avoid the autobiographical and don't base my work on my own direct experience. I've never been a butcher, a prison-visiting detective or a son of the Fens. Nor do I base my characters on people I know, let alone my friends. As an author who's favoured the intimacy of the first person over the 'authorial' third person, I'd regard it as a mark of achievement if in my work the author seems to vanish; and the occasional strange sensation of that actually happening as I write is, for me, one of the thrills of the act of writing. This book tries to show the other side of the coin. I haven't attempted to disappear in it. It even gives some emphasis to the personal touch.

It's true that in a fundamental sense all fiction writing is autobiographical, since where else does it come from but from within the author? Writing is also something, I've found, that constantly brings you up against yourself and surprises you with the discovery of what you have inside. But this often intensely personal

process is very different from the notion that fiction is just a recycling of the contents of the writer's life. I find distasteful the idea that writers are on a permanent reconnaissance trip—one eye always on the lookout for what might fuel their work—as I find wearisome the surprisingly common assumption among readers and even some professional commentators that novels must surely be about what has actually happened to the author. I thoroughly believe that the novel isn't some separate area of specialized mental activity, but a thing that reflects and serves life—D. H. Lawrence went so far as to call it 'the one bright book of life'—but I also believe that there is writing and there is life.

This book may have several things to say about writing and writers, but I hope it offers a glimpse or two into my life—my writer's life or just my life. Looking through it, I find in fact that there's quite a lot in it about getting away from writing, or about not getting round to it.

It's very much a book about people, and in choosing its contents I've tried to share it with my friends. Sometimes this is literally the case—several interviews are included—but a main aim has been to offer portraits of and pay tribute to individuals I've been lucky enough to know, sometimes just briefly, sometimes over long periods of my life. I've tried to give some sense of their personal company. Some of them are gone now; others are very much present, and I've stretched the range of this aspect of the book to embrace at least two figures I could not possibly have met or known, though they've been for me like presences.

I apologize to the friends featured in these pages for any errors and misrepresentations, and simultaneously apologize to many friends who aren't mentioned. This book is in no way comprehensive and their exclusion isn't meant disloyally, but simply springs from the vagaries of how most of the pieces first came

about. A number stem from previous publications. Some have been revised or added to extensively, some left as they were. One or two were written some while ago but never published, a few have been written expressly for this book or to provide links in its framework.

The framework is broadly chronological, but (as in my novels) some liberties are taken with time. The book starts, as it were, when I was six and ends with a man who lived in the sixteenth century. In between, there is some more modest hopping forward or back.

This is a collection of non-fiction, but included in it is some poetry. The arrangement isn't meant to suggest that the poetry is the filler in a sandwich. I'm not sure whether poetry falls into the category of fiction or non-fiction, or is a separate sphere altogether. The poems were produced in a between-novels interval when I didn't quite know what I wanted to do next, yet wanted to keep my engine running in an interesting, different way. I found myself just writing poems for a while, then it stopped. I've no idea if such a phase will come upon me again.



The author at work in the 1950s

SANTA'S CLINIC

CROYDON, 1955

I have two memories of childhood which have become permanently entangled with each other. One is of being taken when I was very small to have my polio inoculation, an event anticipated with a mounting dread which the actual procedure did nothing to dispel. A special clinic had been set up in a local hospital, where small children passed through one door to the needle-plying doctors, then emerged through another where a grimly smiling nurse doled out sweets. There was a lot of screaming and blubbing, not only from those about to go in, but, rather more seriously, from those coming out, unconsoled by their sugary hand-outs. I can't remember if I cried myself. I've probably suppressed the trauma. But I do remember that the nurse with the sweets seemed as much a part of the ordeal as anything else.

I have the dimmest recollection of being prepared at my primary school for this event and of part of the dread being the realization that there was no route of exemption. As an infant, you could wriggle, almost by definition, out of most things, but this was brutal conscription aimed at the most tender. It was certainly beyond me to appreciate that the business of the two doors was my lucky birthright—the National Health Service in its own zealous infancy—and something for which I ought really to have been very glad. A whole generation, for the first time in history,

was being spared at least one very nasty form of being crippled for life.

I must have had my polio jab around Christmas time, because the second memory is of being with my mother in a Croydon department store where a lavish, glittery Santa's grotto had been constructed. Here again there were the small children entering through one door then emerging through another, with, instead of sweets, little wrapped gifts in their hands. True, many of these children came out gleefully smiling, but not a few, I noticed, came out in tears. The similarities were too vivid, the throwback to that hospital room too overpowering. If I had any plans for calling on Santa, they stopped right there.

Whatever age I was, I knew more about Santa Claus than I did about polio. I didn't know why polio (a rather nice-sounding word) had to be avoided or how having a needle thrust in your arm could possibly ensure this. But I knew about reindeer and chimneys. If superstition consists of submitting to bizarre rituals in the cause of something you cannot rationalize, then that experience of the syringe and of the nurse sticking a sweet on my tongue like a communion wafer was superstition unqualified.

The Santa Claus business, though, isn't really about superstition. It's about that stuff—or that partner at least—of fiction, the suspension of disbelief.

I can't remember ever utterly believing in Santa Claus, but I do remember, even quite consciously, suspending my disbelief—playing along with the parental conspiracy—for the sake of the magic of the fiction. My instinct, seeing those tearful faces leaving the grotto, was that here was magic being destroyed.

Children aren't stupid or impercipient creatures, but they have a benign, if also vulnerable, capacity to enter wholeheartedly into the spirit of an invention. The average adult is embarrassed by

things made up. He or she prefers the no-nonsense efficacy of vaccine and syringes: magic made scientifically transparent. If you want to destroy the power of fiction the best way to do it is to attempt to give it material form—to hire real-life Santas and stick them in papier-mâché grottoes. I think those children crying after visiting Santa had suffered something much worse than the puncturing of their arms: the shattering of their dreams. Watching them, I must have concluded that if you got up close to a real-life Santa he might not prove so wonderful after all. If I'd been older I might have embellished this apprehension with cynical details. He might have broken veins and insincere eyes. He might have alcohol on his breath and even, after a hard day's ho-ho-ing, do things with those little boys and girls he shouldn't. Worst of all, he might simply not *convince*. My answer to all this, my way of protecting the magic, was to stay away from the dubious old fellow. So far, I have never stepped into Santa's grotto.

But I still have a pale floret on my left arm which has protected me, like some talismanic tattoo, from a real and cruel disease.

Fiction is also a kind of inoculation, a vaccine, preserving us from such plagues as reality can breed. But, like all true vaccines, it will work only if it contains a measure of the plague itself, a tincture of the thing it confronts. There may be no sure inoculation or remedy against the sufferings of an infant whose dreams of Santa have been broken by actually paying him a visit. Yet perhaps there is: that is, precisely to tell the story of just such an upsetting visit; to construct from that a new, less comforting but no less involving adventure of the little boy or girl's encounter with the real adult world lurking within the enchanted grotto.

After well over three decades of being a writer of fiction, I still believe that fiction—storytelling—is a magical thing. Why else

do we still talk about being under a story's 'spell'? However we may analyse or try to explain it, the power of a good story is a primitive, irreducible mystery that answers to some need deep in human nature. I think it's salutary for even the most modern writer to recognize this—that you are, as it were, dealing with something beyond you, with a force you can never outguess. Once you make a complete and exclusive equation between what you consciously put in and the effect that will emerge (and, time and time again, it's very hard to avoid doing this), you will have lost something. Your writing may be competent, but it will be diminished.

For writer and reader, fiction should always have that flicker of the magical, but it also does something that's completely the opposite. Repeatedly, fiction tries to embrace, to capture, to confront—often grimly and unflinchingly—the real. This is one of its supreme functions too: to bring us down to earth. No better vehicle for this descending journey has been found than the novel. Indeed, from *Don Quixote* to *Madame Bovary* and onwards, fiction has been centrally concerned with the demolition of magic and dreams; with the way in which our airy notions come up against the hard facts or downright banality of experience. This is entirely healthy: fiction as a corrective to our evasions of an uncompromisingly concrete world. But the remarkable thing about fiction is that it can perform the two apparently contradictory tasks at the same time. It can be both magical and realistic. When we read *Don Quixote* or *Madame Bovary* we don't feel coerced into bathos, we feel a thrill.

Back in the 1980s, when my first novels were published, a literary term had for some while been enjoying a vogue: 'magical realism'. I admit that when I wrote *Waterland* I even thought I was being a bit of a magical realist myself. The term has now long

passed its sell-by date, and was fairly bogus in the first place. It seemed to encapsulate perfectly that twofold and paradoxical nature of fiction; but if that were so, it was really saying nothing new or revelatory and, in practice, it reeked of a rather programmatic specialism. It owed a lot to some then-popular Latin American writing in which surreal or supernatural events might be 'realistically' injected into the naturalistic tissue of a novel, or real events might acquire a magical flavour. Writers had been doing this sort of thing for centuries, but 'magical realism' implied that by the mixing in of such fantastical stuff, some much-needed magic could be put *back* into fiction. As if it had ever gone.

The real magic (if that expression is legitimate) of fiction goes much deeper than a few sprinklings of hocus-pocus, but we know when it's there and we feel its tingle in the spine. There can even be something magical about the perfectly judged and timed revelation on the page of an unanswerable truth we already inwardly acknowledge. In good fiction, without any trickery, truth and magic aren't incompatible at all.

To come back to Santa in his grotto—or rather to his real-life, historical originator. The actual Saint Nicholas was a much less cosy, if more saintly, figure than our Father Christmas, and well enough acquainted with the sordid realities of the world. One of his good deeds was to intervene to prevent a penniless father putting his three daughters on the streets. Posterity has turned him into a more magical yet more flimsy and sentimental creation—bound to come to grief in the form of a sobbing, disillusioned child in a modern department store.

Was it outside Santa's grotto that I had my first intimation of the dual nature of fiction? I doubt it very much. I just hadn't got over my polio jab. Our age believes implicitly in vaccines, in hard

knowledge and clinical veracity, but it also makes an increasing commercial razzmatazz out of Christmas. Since the Fifties, in fact, Christmas has spread like some infection for which there is as yet no known vaccine. It stages its first outbreaks in early October, if not before. The razzmatazz may be manifestly grotesque and blatantly money-spinning, but within it is the neurotically spiralling symptom of our need for magic. If this were not the case, why not construct a consumer bonanza out of any old date? We have got our sense of magic wrong. It's gone far beyond the truth. Fiction can help to put the relationship right.