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in bag*

Going Through Your Apprenticeship Gladly

Yesterday, I sold another novel to HarperCollins, my fourth published novel, my favorite novel, EARL IN THE YELLOW SHIRT, written in 1987. Why almost a decade after it was written? Simple. I was in apprenticeship in 1987--ten long years without selling even a short story. Since then, Joyce Carol Oates and Ray Smith, of Ontario Review Press, have published my first story collection; HarperCollins will publish my second; and individual stories are coming out from such places as STORY, NPR, and ONTARIO REVIEW. I was going through my apprenticeship then, but not gladly.

I made myself miserable with longing to be published. I had a Manhattan agent sending out my novels and stories, but nothing was happening. On a good day, I would get only one rejection--praiseworthy letters that kept me writing, kept me longing. I would have been better off to have waited till I was ready before asking a publisher to spend 40 to 60,000 dollars to take me on as a new writer. I didn't know that; nobody had told me. Beginning writers have to go through apprenticeships. A beginning writer has to wait. And wait.

In 1982, I wrote my first novel, a story about a woman's trials and tribulations--cliche intended for a cliche novel--the usual. Maybe the worst novel ever written. I should win a prize. Three months later I was hot into my second novel about a land-hungry man hitting bottom. Another three months and I was writing a coming-of-age story--you know how that goes. But I was learning to write by writing; I wasn't there, but on my way to there--getting published. I had to learn to write by writing, and to my way of thinking, there is no other way--tally up the writers you know who have exhausted themselves with two to four years in some writing program. Same old story, and they are working on the same old stories, because they haven't gone through their apprenticeships.

Recently, I met a writer at a workshop--middle-aged male--who had been hacking away at his first, same-old novel. Sending it out and getting back form rejections. Damned man wouldn't let it go, couldn't let it go. He was hooked into a writing workshop with fellow student and teacher comments and couldn't let go. If only you'll change the viewpoint, they would say, or the dialogue, or the angle, you'll get published. A lie. Poor fellow was learning to fish by fishing, and his bait was catching no fish.

DARK OF THE MOON, my first published novel, was written in 1991; NECESSARY LIES, my second published novel, was written in 1989. PAWPAW PATCH, in 1992. EARL IN THE YELLOW SHIRT, 1987. And WHISTLE in 1996. If I had stuck with the novel about a woman's trials and tribulations, I would never have gotten published. I had to move on, and I'm still moving on, through number 24 novel. That's how it works. And I'm still in apprenticeship, but going through it gladly now.