



# On Becoming a Writer

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“KEEP READING, ESPECIALLY NARRATIVE FICTION,” said Andy Dehnart, assistant professor of journalism.

That was the advice Andy gave me at the end of the semester at a spring 2013 nonfiction workshop. He instructed me that by reading more fiction I could add more scenes and characters to my personal essays when appropriate and perhaps increase the emotional charge, too. That summer, I took to novels, something my shelf was lacking.

I began modestly, reading Orwell’s fiction and other classics like Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but it didn’t take long for something deep within me to rekindle. I tapped into the passion and love that had been there from the start.

Back in middle school, I had eagerly awaited the Scholastic book catalog, and I always ordered at least one or more books a month. At that age I read fantasy, of course.

Through books, other worlds had me in their clutches, and I surrendered. It wasn’t until high school that my reading sharply declined and then halfway through came back as a love for science-popularizing books, the likes of Sagan and Dawkins. I escaped into an awe-inspiring reality: astronomy and biology, physics and psychology.

But then, at Andy’s suggestion, there I was, well into college and back within the flow of

fiction, being carried much further and deeper than ever before. Soon, I was up late, restless in bed, when a story came to me.

I had to write it down.

It was my first real attempt at fiction: a horror tale. I began to write more, not horror, but stories exploring loss and loneliness, stories that rose from my subconscious. I realized that this was what I wanted to do: write fiction. I would read everything I possibly could.

This is how I met Associate Professor of English Mark Powell. I discovered that an actual novelist, someone who does what I want to do, was teaching at Stetson, and I took a multi-genre class where he taught the fiction portion.

I read his psychologically disquieting novel *The Dark Corner* and was convinced of his tremendous talent. Last summer, I took two more classes with him: fiction workshop and an independent study on magic realism.

One on one, I talked with him about great novels and novelists, such as Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Mark, being from the South, introduced me to the Mississippi magic realism of Lewis Nordan with *Wolf Whistle*.

It wasn’t until Mark gave our fiction class an assignment to write from the point of view

of a child that I learned how to control my prose and make it less grandiloquent and more “translucent,” as Mark described it. I was taught to leave something for the reader to project, feeding and trusting the reader’s imagination as much as my own, a joint effort.

This moment was another epiphany for me, and so, along with the inspiration of DeLillo’s sparse prose in novellas like *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, I wrote in a more restrained and careful manner.

Mark and Andy, along with the Stetson experience, allowed me to find a lost love and grow it larger than it ever was.

During winter break, I took up the arduous and masochistic task of writing my first novel. All writing should have moral substance, as Mark insisted. Fiction is how we know ourselves. With it, we construct a mental map that details the selves of others with different ideas, cultures, perspectives, ways of living and being. And we can find out: This is where we and others exist.

Fiction, much like travel, is the antidote to ignorance and solipsism.

With this in mind, allow me to end with a quote from a wrongly slandered and must-read novel, Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*: “A poet’s work [is] to name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep.”