

# Creative tension

A good story demands a riveting dilemma

BY SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN

I WAS A BEGINNING WRITER whose dream was to tear stories from herself, fiction that would offer the reader the transitory enjoyment of escape to virtual reality, transform a life or lives and hold its meaning for readers in years to come.

Chris Loken, a novelist who owns an apple orchard in upstate New York and writes in the quiet of winter, was my guru-figure who had gone further down the writing path. His work includes *Come Monday Mornin'* and *The Boy Next Door*, now out of print; his current project is a trilogy, *Cry of the Prairie*, about the decline of the family farm in the Midwest. Back then, he was the only real live novelist who would stand my questions, assuring me laconically and often, "Your stories oughta be told," "Great scene," or "Who knows, one of your characters could light up some poor bastard's life."

Out of deep frustration, I once told Chris that I had begun writing, but I was turning out descriptive scenes, static character sketches—no stories. My characters were too nice. My writing suffered from the Nothing-Ever-Happens syndrome.

"No conflict," said Chris.

"Can't there be fiction without conflict?"

Chris clasped his hands behind his neck. I could feel his mind rifling the pages of Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Vonnegut. If he'd been [www.ChrisLoken.com](http://www.ChrisLoken.com), I'd have surfed away to several other sites by now. But this was pre-Internet, and I needed an answer to my question.

"No," said Chris slowly, as if he considered something so obvious, so much a premise of his work, that he'd never felt a need to express it. "You can't write fiction without conflict. Without conflict you get travel or memoir-writing, maybe a character sketch—but even those could use a little shakeup."

Chris had done his job as guru for the day—he'd swept away my sandcastles. In "real" life, I was the classic avoider of conflict, the escape artist, the facilitator. But I returned to my notebook with new resolve: My protagonists would have identifiable antagonists, external or internal.

I would face conflict, if only on the page. I had the sickness—I needed to write fiction.

## Conflict as a source

List a few conflicts and taboo subjects in North America today: Interracial marriage, class, labor concerns, environmental issues, abortion rights, imperialism, immigration policies, religious fundamentalism ... are you writing yet? If your pen is to be mightier than the sword, you—the writer—are responsible to discuss and expose the forces creating society's problems. Not to judge these problems, but to explore the tension between people who face them, entertaining your readers as you go. Can your words break through contemporary cynicism and touch a sense of wonder, anger, pain, fear, curiosity and delight?

Every stage of writing fiction is difficult precisely because fiction allows and forces us to face conflict in situations we devise. If it were easy, we wouldn't complain to and commiserate with one another or read articles like this one. If it were easy, we could all write with consistently superb aesthetic effects and sustained narrative tension, integrating plot logic with emotional intensity. And make a decent living doing it.

To be a writer is to be privileged. Few writers—even in underdeveloped countries—are starving. Writers in the United States are protected by shared prosperity, social services and freedom of speech from the many terrible conditions blighting the efforts of writers in other countries. Our major pitfall in writing is, as in other areas of life, sliding into navel-gazing. Share lunch with an understanding friend when your fictional conflicts begin paralleling those in your own life—even the most forgiving readers don't waste time on unadulterated confession and catharsis. For a tale to be interesting to readers, it won't be about your persona, but of the potential for conflict between good and evil that lies unacknowledged within all of us.

But don't air your stories to your understanding friend; reserve your need to tell the tale and resolve its



conflicting forces for the blank page. Your story or novel is an egg carried close to the heart—fragile. You're responsible for carrying it, protecting and nourishing it till it hatches. Then talk about it.

### Putting on new glasses

As a boy, Buckminster Fuller couldn't see things very well. He saw only the main features, the outline of objects, so he theorized about the relationships of large objects. When he finally received glasses, he said it reframed every object and filled in the details, changing his perception of the world. When you frame conflict, examining situations slowly and deeply through fiction, your novel's spotlight on a conflict situation alters the reader's view, and often your own as well.

The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle in quantum mechanics—that the observer changes the subject of his or her observation—applies to narratives as well, even when the writer begins from true or autobiographical events. Each of us can cite contemporary novelists—Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison—who have reframed our view of history by focusing on events from marginalized points of view: women, homosexuals, African Americans and other minorities.

Placing a frame around any particular conflict situation and describing what lies within says that you believe a particular story has value. To ask readers to give your story their attention in our fast-paced world, you must believe it worthy of their time and the trees felled to print it. Plotting or outlining frames the conflict. My last novel, *What the Body Remembers*, explores the conflict between two women in a polygamous marriage in colonial India (1937-1947). Telling that particular story, of all the ones I might have told, said, in effect, "I think it's important to examine these characters and events at this time; perhaps you'd like to come along."

The vicarious suffering and joy that readers have learned to expect from fiction can be sparked only from the suffering and joy of the writer. Replay the old aphorism: "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader."

Facing the conflict within the frame then requires you to dissociate from the persona you have constructed and socialized since birth and become another—say, someone who epitomizes all that you hate. Move away from your carefully crafted identity, slip past the confines of your skin to see, touch, taste, smell and hear from other points of view.

Think of all the beings you might have been—animals, men, women, children, rich, poor, black, white,

Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Martian—or could be if you had taken the road less traveled, and you will meet your characters. Think of the times you might have enjoyed, perhaps an era or place you would not have liked. Many of us prefer our own times, but perhaps there are places you'd like to go for a rest from our frantic high-tech world? Developing characters creates alternative identities, expressing not only parts of who we are but exploring what we are not.

### Word colors

A gardener sees a flower and asks, "How can I grow this?" The artist sees the very same flower and says, "What colors shall I mix to depict this flower?" while a writer asks, "What is the name of this flower?" Each has a different response to the same situation. Depending on setting and times, a boy might notice different things in his environment than a girl would. Allow each of your characters his or her unique point of view, a view resulting from personality, nature, culture, race, gender, age, class and education.

In *What the Body Remembers*, Satya, the senior wife, is 42, while Roop, the junior wife, is 16 and of lower birth than Satya. Each has a unique point of view. Satya's emotions range from angry and authoritarian to wounded and reflective to vengeful and bitter to love for her husband. Roop's point of view is bright, curious, innocent, charming, ambitious, wondering and seeking, as people and events test and mold her to someone who has something to offer her husband.

Their common husband, oblivious, above-it-all, very proper Sardarji, causes the women's rivalry—in the same way as the British caused the conflicts between Muslims and Hindus of colonial India—until the children, like the Sikhs, members of the offspring religion of Islam and Hinduism, are caught in the middle and Sardarji's house, like the country itself, must be divided because it can no longer be shared.

Stay with your character's point of view once you have moved into it. Select metaphors true to your characters, their time and their environment. All of us can recount eye-rolling examples of texts written about places or people we know well—they ring false when the writer imposes an unrelated paradigm on the characters. For instance, I winced when a Hindu woman in a novel written by a person of Euro-American heritage, spoke about the return of her "prodigal" son; the biblical reference told me the writer hadn't budged from his own point of view. When mental leaps across the skin barrier into other worldviews fall short, writing can turn stilted, self-righteous or pedantic.

So question the essence of who you are and who you might have been if you had lived in another time or place, or made different decisions. Explore tensions and conflicts within you, wrestle with the great themes.



## Conjuring controversy

Novelists whose work we remember for years—Mark Twain, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Joseph Conrad, Ernest Hemingway—are conjurers of image and debaters with the dead. They were and are the stubborn among us who explore forbidden themes and unspeakable conflicts, whose characters transcend race, class and gender boundaries. The prose they leave reminds us of much we prefer to forget. And your fiction must compete with theirs for shelf space in bookstores and for the mind-share of readers. Today your fiction must compete with the print and digital works of writers from all over the world and with out-of-print and used books that can be found a mouse-click away on the Web.

So your fiction must be the best it can possibly be.

Don't procrastinate or lose heart if you can't find the theme of your story as you begin. Laurel Boone, editorial director at Goose Lane Editions, says: "How do I know what I mean till I see what I say?" Learning what you mean is finding the theme of your work—it is also the joy of writing. It took me a whole year of working on *What the Body Remembers* to realize that the tensions of the polygamous marriage in the novel mirrored the tensions building in colonial India.

To find the gap in the universe where your story belongs, retrace the intellectual history of your subject, examining texts of the past to find the antitheses of the text you will write. Research clarifies the conflicting forces to be reconciled, bringing your theme into focus. When you know what you do not want to replicate, you will be ready to build a world for the transmission of a new point of view—yours.

Face the philosophical conflicts that no one has or will ever resolve—theism/atheism, war/nonviolence, determinism/free will, nature/nurture—and you will write "in the direction of truth," as Hélène Cixous says. Texts that hold meaning for generations speak the unsaid premises and motivations of actions and inaction, discovering or revealing tension on the blank page in language that may not have happened if the tale were told and revised orally.

## The challenge of truth

Say "I am a writer" and you assume responsibility for recording, describing and capturing the world, giving it back with all its pain and confusion organized and rendered into narrative with linguistic beauty and humor. Writing fiction, we strive for complexity without pedantry, simplicity without letting our texts degenerate to personal propaganda, and, as in all the arts, the transmuting of pain to beauty.

Novels require far more conflict than do short stories. Sustaining one takes both physical and mental stamina. Writing is a whole-body experience—so join

an exercise class, jog or walk daily to keep yourself in writing shape.

Because writing fiction asks no less than the transformation of your self from an exchange with your opposite, expect the conflict to be painful. The vicarious suffering and joy that readers have learned to expect from fiction can be sparked only from the suffering and joy of the writer. Replay the old aphorism: "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader."

Socrates said the beginning of all wisdom is when we

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realize how little we know. Each story tells us how little we know before we even begin. To write what you know, therefore, forfeits the game before it has begun; but if you set out to write the book that *only* you can write, the most valuable prize will be the growth you experience from the writing.

Writing the story only you can write involves contending with the great motivator: your own mortality. For there comes a turning point in the telling when you feel a sense of obligation to the characters, as if to loved ones. When the sheer fun of writing shifts to a responsibility to complete the text, it gets serious: a cyber-friend told me she once considered adding a literary provision in her will designating her spouse as inheritor of her duty to complete her novel—a tall order! While I have never contemplated such drastic measures, it's comforting to know that even Keats felt the same dread: "That I might cease to be/before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain."

Postponement is my standby whenever I do not wish to face areas of the conflict that I've set up—difficult descriptions, characters who act in ways I abhor. One of my books was saved from languishing on my computer's hard drive by a nudge from Boone: "Write now," she said. "Give it who you are at present. If you leave it too long, you'll change."

See your characters through the tough times, the conflicts you've set up for them. Stay with them and complete their stories: You owe them.

Not long after my friend Chris' advice on conflict, I had drafts for four short stories. As I introduced conflict situations, my characters became protagonists and antagonists to each other. They acted and reacted—and they weren't such nice people anymore. My stories began to move and grow, cured of the Nothing-Ever-Happens syndrome.

And so I wish you, fellow writer, as much conflict as you can handle. #