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# The Drive to Write: Inside the Writing Lives of Five Fiction Authors

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# The Drive to Write:

# Inside the Writing Lives of Five Fiction Authors

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of
Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Clinical Psychology at
Antioch University New England, 2015

Keene, New Hampshire

Department of Clinical Psychology

**DISSERTATION COMMITTEE PAGE**

The undersigned have examined the dissertation entitled:

**THE DRIVE TO WRITE:**
**INSIDE THE WRITING LIVES OF FIVE FICTION AUTHORS**

presented on December 10, 2015

by

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While I worked on this dissertation I had two babies and moved twice. I completed my doctoral coursework, an advanced practicum, an internship, and a post-doctoral fellowship. Thank you to my family for bearing with me. Thank you to Aaron for your unceasing patience and for always supporting me in following my passion. It was validating to see that my love of this topic inspired you to start reading fiction! Jonathan Lethem said in our interview, "There's this sort of fantasy that some day you'll clear everything out and be only writing. But I think the urge to complicate that accompanies the fact that you usually *need* to complicate that or

modulate that in some way, that actually it has to be balanced against other things." To my two beautiful, hilarious, sweet children, who offer me that modulation and always remind me of what is truly important in life. Love you to the moon and back.

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## Abstract

Authors of fiction often describe writing as a psychologically meaningful and emotionally charged process. While ample research has provided evidence for the mental and physical health benefits of writing (e.g., Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999), few studies have methodically examined the inner life of the fiction writer. This study explored two primary questions: (a) Why do authors write? and (b) How does the act of writing affect them in turn? This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a guiding methodology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five authors of fiction, then transcribed and analyzed to generate a rich interpretative account. The motivations for writing fiction were found to be complex and multifaceted and the impact often subtle, but profound. Authors both forget and find themselves in the task of writing. They temporarily leave behind their everyday lives as they become absorbed in the task of writing and transported into the worlds of their characters. Simultaneously, the author can access, utilize, and play with psychological and affective material. The authors described the act of entering into and conveying their characters' experiences as allowing them to name and make sense of their own experiences, gain greater understanding and empathy for others, and explore their own questions, identities, and beliefs. At times it also helps them gain greater acceptance and decreased sensitivity to more challenging emotions, memories, and relationships. However, authors do not usually write to consciously gain these benefits. They write because they are writers, because they love their characters, and because they love story.

*Keywords:* writing, fiction, authors, interpretative phenomenological analysis

"Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time."

(Merton, 2005, p. 35)

"To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them:

Isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot?"

(Franzen, 2003, p. 84)

The Drive to Write: Inside the Writing Lives of Five Fiction Authors

When I left for college and my parents became empty nesters, I asked them what they were going to do with their extra time. At the top of each of their lists was to write. My father wanted to finish his screenplay and my mother was looking forward to having more time for the book she had started writing years before. I didn't understand this pull. Wasn't writing incredibly arduous? Didn't it require immense work with little chance of success?

Then a few summers ago a story emerged in my mind and I felt compelled for the first time to sit down each day and translate the images in my head into words. After a few months, with trepidation and excitement, I read it to my brother and mother. "It needs a lot of work," they said. It was cliché. I was telling too much and not showing enough. I was devastated and thought about quitting, but instead started over. I was hooked. I understood for the first time the deep desire to write fiction—to try to make something compelling out of my experience, to engage in the fascinating process of trying to translate my thoughts and emotions into words, to escape into a fantastical world, and to constantly be surprised by what emerged on the page. I was also struck with the complexity and elusiveness of my motives. Yet, I began to wonder—why *have* humans felt this pull to tell and write stories for centuries?

James Baldwin (1984) said in an interview that a story is "something that irritates you and won't let you go. That's the anguish of it. Do this book, or die. You have to go through that" (p. 21). While Baldwin's perspective may be extreme, countless writers describe this visceral pull to write. Philip Pullman, the author of a popular young adult fantasy series, said, "I am the servant of the story. The story made me do it. That was what had to happen" (Miller, 2005, p. 6). The intensity of this pull and the emotionally charged nature of the writing process described by authors suggest that writing story can often play a deeply personal and psychological role in their

lives. Though this powerful desire to write may contain within it dreams of success or fantasies of being praised and published, interviews with and essays by writers reveal that the story and characters usually call out most clearly to them, finally luring them into the fictional world. J.K. Rowling, for instance, had a vision of Harry Potter while she sat on a train and from then on was overtaken by the need to get his story down on paper, despite the fact that at the time she was a broke, single mother. What makes the chosen story so alluring? Through the characters, are writers living out their wishes vicariously, confronting their deepest fears, working through loss and longing, or conveying some element of their experience that they long to express, but can't explain in rational, expository language? Or is it primarily a job for them? Finally, when the book has been written and closed, does the author then feel that writing this story changed them? These were the questions that inspired me to pursue this dissertation. Through a careful analysis of interviews with five authors of fiction, this study aimed to explore the experience of writing fiction and the psychological and emotional role that writing plays in the authors' lives.

## Literature Review—Why Write?

### Mental and Physical Health Benefits of Writing

Research has provided ample evidence that writing can have a positive psychophysiological impact on the author. James Pennebaker, along with various colleagues, conducted extensive research documenting the physical and mental health benefits of autobiographical writing (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). For instance, Pennebaker and Beall asked 46 first-year college students to spend 15 minutes writing each day for four days. The students were either told to write about a traumatic experience or a benign, trivial topic. The researchers found that "writing about earlier traumatic experience was

associated with both short-term increases in physiological arousal and long-term decreases in health problems" (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986, p. 280). The students in the trauma disclosure group made significantly fewer health center visits than the other group.

Since Pennebaker and Beall's (1986) study was published, extensive research has been conducted on the physical and mental health benefits of written disclosure. To name just a few, studies have indicated that expressive writing is correlated with lower levels of depression (Lepore, 1997), increased immune functioning (Pennebaker et al., 1988), and increased levels of antibodies to the Epstein-Barr virus (Esterling, Antoni, Fletcher, Margulies, & Schneiderman, 1994). In addition, studies have shown that the topic need not be trauma or upsetting experiences for one to benefit from the process of writing. In one study, 90 undergraduates were asked to either write about intensely positive experiences or mundane experiences 20 minutes a day for three days. In the three months following the writing exercises, the "mundane-writing group" visited the health center at a significantly higher rate than the "positive-writing group" (Burton & King, 2004).

In a meta-analysis of the literature on writing, Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) sought an explanation for the results of these studies. They write that "the mere expression of a trauma is not sufficient to bring about long-term physiological changes. Health gains appear to require translating experiences into language" (pp. 1247-1248). They use the example of a study that compared the effects of expressing trauma through dance or writing combined with dance (Krantz & Pennebaker, 2007). Only the combined writing-dance group showed significant changes in health and grade-point-average several months afterwards. They explain this as follows:

The act of converting emotions and images into words changes the way the person

> organizes and thinks about the trauma. By integrating thoughts and feelings, the person then can construct more easily a coherent narrative of the experience. Once formed, the event can now be summarized, stored, and forgotten more efficiently. (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999, p. 1248)

Similarly, Jerome Bruner (2002) writes that “our stories also impose a structure, a compelling reality on what we experience” (p. 89). Can writing fiction fit this description—a means of organizing and understanding emotional material and experiences, but through constructed characters and fantastical plots? Norman Mclean said, “Stories give shape to experience and allow us to go through life unblind” (as cited in Banaszynski, 2002, p. 41). Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) write that what is critical in studies on writing “is that people are encouraged to explore their emotions and thoughts no matter what the content might be” (pp. 1246-1247). Then can converting one’s thoughts, fantasies, and experiences into a fictional story also result in a more coherent narrative of experience? If so, what are the resulting effects on the author?

One study compared the health outcomes of female participants who wrote about an imagined or a real trauma (Greenberg, Wortman, & Stone, 1996). The researchers found that the “imaginary trauma group” displayed equal health benefits as the “real trauma group” at a four week follow-up. They point out that, likewise, for exposure or trauma therapy to be effective the patient need not be exposed to the specific phobia-provoking stimulus or trauma memory, but any stimulus which provokes anxiety through which the patient can learn cognitive-affective coping skills (Foa & Kozak, 1986; Watson & Marks, 1971). Similarly, Greenberg and colleagues theorize that writing about an imagined event may enhance affect regulation and help one construct a more resilient sense of self. They explain that writing about an imagined trauma can “foster self-empathy by allowing participants to observe their own emotional pain in a context

uncontaminated by knowledge of failed coping efforts and associated self-derogation" (p. 599). One could make the conjecture, then, that whether the actual material one writes about is fact or fantasy matters less than whether it provokes, and allows the writer to process, emotionally laden material.

Besides Greenberg et al.'s study, there is a surprising dearth of research on fiction writing, especially given the relatively large quantity on autobiographical writing as well as the therapeutic use of poetry (Heimes, 2011). In all of the above studies, outcome is determined by quantifiable phenomenon such as number of health center visits, antibodies, or depression levels. While these findings are certainly important and provide empirical support for the therapeutic effects of writing, they tell us little of the inner life of the author and the emotional and psychological impact of writing fiction. To determine this, a qualitative study was more appropriate, one that examined the lived experience of writing fiction.

In addition, as we have seen, studies on the therapeutic effects of writing tend to utilize brief writing assignments with subjects who are not professional authors. This does allow the findings to be generalized to a broader population and provides support for the use of brief writing assignments in therapeutic settings. However, it fails to address the question of what motivates authors to write and how this process affects authors who spend months or even years immersed in the landscapes of their stories. Greenberg and colleagues (1996) found, in analyzing the participants' written pieces, that the extent to which the participants became affectively immersed in the scenario they were writing about was more important in terms of health benefits than whether the story they wrote about was true or not. One could presume, then, that an author who lives with their characters for an extended time and travels through a story from start to

finish may be greatly affected psychologically and emotionally by their writing. Let us briefly examine what authors themselves have said about this.

**Qualitative Research and Interviews**

In interviews with authors it is clear that writing fiction does often have a profound impact on their inner lives. Some authors describe experiencing moments of catharsis while writing. For example, one author said, “As I wrote the Manny passages, I would sit there sobbing. I would have to keep my keyboard clean . . . mopping up” (Doyle, 1998, p. 33). In addition, as mentioned earlier, the author often feels an intense inclination to write that can’t be disregarded. Anne Hoffman (2000) said that while struggling through cancer treatment, “I wrote because that was who I was at the core, and if I was too damaged to walk around the block, I was lucky all the same” (para. 11). Furthermore, the process of writing can have an almost inexplicable effect on the author’s sense of self and meaning. Margaret Atwood (1990), in an interview, said, “I don’t think I solve problems in my poetry; I think I uncover the problems. Then the novel seems a process of working them out” (para. 31). Likewise, Eli Wiesel (2000) wrote, “*Night* silenced in me the voices that clamored to be heard” (para 14). In an anonymous blog, one person wrote, “The catharsis from killing the character based on myself in my terrible novel may have been the only thing that prevented me from doing it in real life” (SH, 2010). Writing fiction is clearly not always simply a pleasure, but can be a heart wrenching and, at times, healing process.

While there are countless interviews with authors and compilations of essays on the process of writing, qualitative studies have not brought together authors’ experiences in an attempt to generate a fuller understanding of the personal impact of writing fiction. In addition, despite the richness of this subject matter, qualitative studies on fiction tend to focus on the

process of writing, not its role in the authors' lives (e.g., Doyle, 1998). Even in interviews and essays, authors rarely speak of the psychological function or source of the content of their works and the influence of writing stories on their inner lives. This tendency is in part due to the difficulty of describing where the material emerges from and how exactly it affects one personally. Writing is in the realm of art; it is not a straightforward, rational process. David Mamet (as cited in Walters, 2010) articulated this beautifully:

> In dreams we do not seek answers which our conscious (rational) mind is capable of supplying, we seek answers to those questions which the conscious mind is incompetent to deal with. So with drama. . . . Only if the question posed is one whose complexity and depth renders it unsusceptible to rational examination does the dramatic treatment seem to us appropriate, and the dramatic solution become enlightening. (pp. 8-9)

As when we wake from a dream, the author's sense is not that writing story has answered some concrete question, but that it has affected them in an intuitive, inexplicable manner.

This parallel between writing and dreaming has often been drawn. Jonathan Franzen (2012) writes, "What is fiction after all if not a kind of purposeful dreaming? The writer works to create a dream that is vivid and has meaning so that the reader can then vividly dream it and experience meaning" (p. 129). Freud (1908/1995) too wrote, "May we really attempt to compare the imaginative writer with the 'dreamer in broad daylight' and his creations with daydreams?" (p. 149). He went on to say that "a strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience . . . from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work" (p. 15). As in dreams, one's subconscious wears the garb of characters playing out a drama in an imagined landscape—perhaps culminating in the fulfillment of wishes or confrontation of fears. But one cannot always articulate what is driving the story,

who the characters represent, and how exactly the written work has affected them. While some authors create elaborate, detailed outlines to guide their story, almost all writers describe being surprised, just as in a dream, by what emerges. One author said, "The surprises our characters bestow upon us—the secrets they reveal, the unexpected actions they take that move the story in a direction we had not originally imagined—are gifts that we can only receive by being open to them" (Doyle, 1998, para 8). As much as one tries to control or plan out the personalities of the characters and what will ensue, how exactly the story and the language unfolds is not entirely under one's control, as with a dream.

Interestingly, just as with Pennebaker's understanding of writing, Fosshage (2007) states that contemporary models of dreaming view its function as "centrally organizing information and regulating affect" (p. 214). Furthermore, as with the studies that found that those who became affectively immersed in their writing showed greater resulting benefits, "research has demonstrated that affect-loaded, imagistically dominated REM dreams are more important that NREM dreams in consolidating memory and dealing with emotional issues" (Kuiken & Sikora, 1993, as cited in Fosshage, 2007, p. 215).

What can we learn from these parallels between dreaming and writing? In this article, Fosshage (2007) says that dreams are often elusive and challenging to make meaning of due to the metaphorical nature of dreams, poor dream recall, and difficulty understanding the meanings of dream images from a waking perspective. He states that one should not, however, attempt to override the cloudy nature of dreams by interpreting the content too literally. The same could be said of trying to analyze written works—the characters and symbols in a novel cannot usually be directly tied to people or events from one's life, but are conglomerations or representations of reality. While occasionally the meaning of a dream or story is obvious, often the emotional

impact is more powerful and evident than the rational meaning of the symbols within it. Franzen (2012) articulates this when he wrote that “there’s an important paradox . . . the greater the autobiographical content of a fiction writer’s work, the smaller its superficial resemblance to the writer’s actual life” (p. 129).

The non-rational nature of writing may partly explain why few have tried to study this subject in a comprehensive manner. Yet, the very reason that it is difficult to study also made it a fascinating and fertile area for investigation. This study did not attempt to break down the nature of writing or to discover exactly who *this* character represents or why the author wrote *that* story. The richer territory was that of affect and meaning. Fosshage (2007) urges the analyst to “listen as closely as possible to the patient’s experience within the dream” (p. 218). Likewise, this study examined the phenomenological experience of writing story. Thus, the primary guiding research question was: What is the experience of creating and living with a fictional story? More specifically:

a. What originally compels an author to write a story/novel?
b. Does writing a story, as well as the characters themselves, have a personal, emotional, and/or psychological impact on the author? If so, in what ways?
c. When a book is completed, has the act of writing had a lasting effect on the author?

Authors are, of course, drawn to write for countless reasons, not usually because they are intentionally using it as a therapeutic method. But the hypothesis of this study was that writing fiction is alluring because it does play a psychological role in the authors’ lives. The aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of the reasons authors are compelled to write and the ways in which the process influences them in turn. Countless artists are out there creating and, in

turn, being impacted by the art they generate. This study was interested in the nature of the relationship between the writer and the novel with the goal of gaining a greater understanding of the psychological role that creating artistic works plays in the life of the artist.

## Guiding Framework and Methodology

The aim of this study was to understand the psychological and emotional impact of writing from the author's perspective. While quantitative methods have been employed previously to investigate the health benefits of writing, a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study given that it was focused on the author's first-hand experience. This section examines the epistemology, ontology, and methodology that were utilized

### Ontology

The phenomenological perspective, with its roots in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, rejects the notion that there is something "behind or underlying or more fundamental than what is experienced" (Ashworth, 2008, p. 11). Unlike the positivist claim that science can discover an objective reality, the phenomenological viewpoint is that there is an external reality, but it is not objectively knowable. All reality, once communicated, has been filtered through human consciousness. Experience is subjective and unique to each individual. There are, therefore, limitations to our ability to truly know another's experience. Language, for instance, and our attempt to categorize experience restricts our ability to communicate the essence of experience. However, phenomenology also emphasizes that research should strive to come as close as possible to understanding the conscious experiences of others, of how people relate to the world that they inhabit, termed the "lifeworld" (Orbe, 2000). Therefore, phenomenology is "a return to things themselves, as experienced" (Ashworth, 2008, p. 11).

**Epistemology**

We come to know what we know only through our conscious experience of our lifeworld (Orbe, 2000). Whereas positivist science attempts to test out hypotheses and form objective theories, phenomenology emphasizes a return to the essence of one's experience of their lifeworld (Orbe, 2000). Knowledge is discovered through description and elucidation of the experiences that people live through. As Ashworth (1996) writes, "It is actual, empirical lifeworlds which a psychology based in phenomenology has as its task to describe" (bracketing presuppositions, para. 5). Therefore, the first task of this study was to allow the participants to describe their lifeworlds in detail, specifically regarding their experience of writing fiction.

However, as Ashworth (1996) writes, "investigation of the life-world does not find its phenomena laid out ready for simple description; critical empathy and careful interpretation are needed" (para. 2). In order to gain understanding or knowledge, we carefully interpret another's description of their experience. However, "careful" is the keyword, because the researcher needs to take a reflexive approach in which he or she is aware of potential biases, assumptions, and viewpoints. These biases or presuppositions are often informed by earlier research findings and the researcher's personal knowledge and experiences (Ashworth, 1996). The researcher strives to limit the impact of their biases and assumptions on their interpretation of the participants' experiences.

**Methodology**

IPA is phenomenological methodology in that it examines the subjective experiences of participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008). It was appropriate for this study because it is not an attempt to produce an objective understanding, but an account of people's perceptions of their experiences. The primary standpoint of the researcher is one of empathy, openness, and curiosity

(Smith & Osborn, 2008). The researcher tries to gain an insider's perspective by asking questions with curiosity and openness, and then becoming immersed in an interpretative process. IPA, therefore, uses a double hermeneutic. That is, "the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 54). While there is always some limit to the ability of the participants to communicate experience and the researcher to fully understand the participant's experience, IPA attempts to help the researcher come as close as possible to this goal. In addition, not only can the researcher (and subsequently the reader of the study) gain knowledge and understanding through the IPA process, but the participants can potentially find meaning through the process of sharing their experiences.

In this study, participants recounted their experiences through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B for interview schedule). The semi-structured interview allowed the interviewer to guide the dialogue to generate detailed descriptions, clarify any comments, and expand on any topics of particular interest (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In addition, by using in-person interviews, non-verbal information such as facial expressions and gesticulations contributed to the researcher's understanding of the participants' experiences.

The IPA method described by Smith and Osborn (2008) provided a detailed methodology for interpreting and pulling out themes from interview transcripts. It was appropriate for this study because it required rereading and immersion in the participants' accounts. It also provided a structured method by which the researcher could generate an interpretative account of the authors' individual as well as shared experiences of writing.

## Methods

**Participant selection**. Smith and Osborn (2008) recommend three to six participants for an

IPA study. I chose to have five participants whose works I was acquainted with and which were psychologically compelling. This, I believed, would allow me to enter to the interview having a sense of the authors' work, to ask informed questions, and to have a rich, in-depth conversation. Furthermore, it was important to enter this project with a sense of curiosity and engagement. This was more viable working with authors whose work I valued and found interesting.

**Ethical considerations and informed consent.** I contacted the authors via email or letter and sent two copies of the informed consent form (Appendix A). The informed consent form contained an explanation of the nature of the interview and dissertation process. Once I received a response via email/letter, I contacted them to set up an interview time. This study was not anonymous or entirely confidential. The authors were given the choice of having their identifying information omitted in the final study in case they felt that this would allow them to talk more freely. However, they all declined this option. In the end, the final description and discussion were richer and more lucid in the context of the personal details revealed by the authors as well as the specific characters and stories they created.

**Interview process.** As Smith and Osborn (2008) write, the participants in an IPA study "can be perceived as the experiential expert on the subject and should therefore be allowed maximum opportunity to tell their story" (p. 59). By using the semi-structured interview, questions were outlined in an interview schedule (Appendix B), but the order and phrasing left open so that the conversation could flow in a natural manner and topics could be pursued that would elicit greater detail. Each interview was audio-recorded. The recordings were then transcribed and reviewed several times before beginning the interpretation process. The recorded and transcribed interviews were saved throughout the process to ensure a clear audit trail.

**Quality control.** From the naturalist and phenomenological perspective, there is not one

objective reality. Therefore, research doesn't aim to reveal the "truth," but shared and divergent experiences. Therefore, what is viewed as error in quantitative research, such as instability, bias, and inconsistency, was instead treated as inevitable. They were therefore not to be guarded against but "to be taken account of" (Guba, 1981, p. 88). Several methods helped me "take account of" these factors and increase the credibility, applicability, and dependability of this study. In terms of credibility, "Naturalistic researchers are most concerned with testing the credibility of their findings and interpretations with the various sources from which data were drawn" (Guba, 1981, p. 80). Therefore, as mentioned previously, in my analysis I continually referred back to the transcripts and recordings to review whether my interpretations were consistent with the participants' words. Secondly, I engaged in peer debriefing. That is, I asked a peer to review my transcripts and interpretations, in particular to determine whether the themes I pulled out made sense from an outside perspective.

Due to the small sample size, the goal was not to make the research generalizable to a broad population. Guba (1981) wrote that the "naturalist does not attempt to form generalizations that will hold in all times and in all places, but to form working hypotheses that may be transferred from one context to another depending upon the degree of "fit" between the contexts" (p. 81). The goal is for readers to be able to relate to, learn from, and make connections to these writers' experiences and perhaps be inspired to pursue their own lines of inquiry. Collecting thick descriptions and providing a rich analysis of the individual and shared experiences of the participants hopefully increased the possibility that the research would be transferable to other contexts. Lastly, rather than claiming neutrality, I strived to maintain awareness of and mitigate the effects of my assumptions and biases in order to come as close as possible to understanding the participants' experiences. However, the interpretive process was inevitably affected by my

worldview. This was seen as an unavoidable and harmless aspect of research as long as efforts were made to be consistent with and respectful of the participants' experiences.

**Analysis of results.** The systematic IPA methods proposed by Smith and Osborn (2008) were also utilized to analyze the transcripts. In IPA, the researcher is trying to capture the participants' experiences and the meaning they place on these experiences. Since these meanings are not always evident at first glance, sustained engagement with and interpretation of the transcript is recommended (Smith & Osborn, 2008). First the interviews were transcribed and then read closely several times. Interesting and relevant topics and summaries were noted in the right margin. This included commenting on the language, summarizing the participant's words, or making my own associations. The transcripts were then reviewed again and emerging themes recorded in the far right margin (see Appendix C for a sample matrix). These themes were "concise phrases which aim to capture the essential quality of what was found in the text" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 68). After this, a list was composed of all the themes that emerged in the transcript, which were then checked back with the transcript to eliminate those themes that weren't backed up by rich descriptions. The next step was to create a table in which the original themes were clustered under superordinate themes, which represented the most salient subjects that emerged. Throughout the process, the transcripts were referred back to in order to ensure that my interpretations fit with the participants' descriptions.

Subsequent transcripts were then examined in the same manner. The next step was to decipher connected, superordinate themes across transcripts. Smith and Osborn (2008) recommend using themes that are rich in detail and illuminate the interconnected topics across the participants' accounts. I also deciphered the ways in which each participant's experience or description of this theme differed. The themes were recorded in another matrix. The last step was

to write up a narrative of the participants' experiences, including verbatim extracts from the transcripts. Throughout these procedures, I referred back to my research questions to guide and ground the interpretive process.

## Results—A Descriptive Narrative

"It's interesting, there are several distant fathers. The fathers are often there but not really there," I said at one point during my interview with Jonathan Lethem. He quickly replied, "Yeah, the presence of an absence and the absence of a presence simultaneously." We were sitting side by side in large, comfy chairs in his writing room, the walls lined with ceiling-to-floor bookcases. Lethem wore converse sneakers, cords, and a blue hoody. His youthful outfit, however, contrasted with his eloquent words. "Again and again," he continued, "I think I'm interested in proximity and intimacy and the way people can be present and absent simultaneously." At the end of our interview as we walked through the living room, a door suddenly swung towards me. I managed to catch it just in time. Out walked an older man who exclaimed, "Sorry about that!" and smiled warmly. Lethem gestured towards him, "This is my father."

Before our interview, I had been wondering whether the laconic, art-obsessed father in *Fortress of Solitude* (Lethem, 2003) reflected Lethem's perception of his own father. Then here he was standing in front of me, smiling and reaching out to shake my hand. Nothing like the somber portrait I had drawn in my mind from Lethem's books. I begin with this story to illustrate the temptation and inaccuracy of using simplistic explanations when trying to understand the implications and origins of an author's work. In the interviews, the authors' descriptions pointed towards the multifaceted nature of their writing experiences, the manifold motivations for

writing, and the complex sources for their characters and stories. Thus, the results are somewhat lengthy in order to tell a full, multilayered narrative of the authors' writing experiences.

I also tell this story to create a visual setting for these interviews. I travelled near and far to meet with these authors and gave them the option of conducting the interview in any quiet location. They graciously invited me into their homes, which created a sense of informality but also a slight tension—I was very aware of being in their space, asking questions about how their personal lives interacted with their writing lives. They were all incredibly open and sincere and decided that it was unnecessary to disguise their identity in the final product. Yet there were times when I felt them holding back. I respected and understood this. For one, this was a single, fairly brief interview. Secondly, while their careers mostly take place in private spaces, hundreds to millions of people read their books. They are public figures to some degree. Despite their understandable hesitation at times, I also felt pleasantly surprised and grateful that they were often willing to be so forthcoming about their personal relationship to their work.

This results section is a narrative of the paths the authors travel as they begin, delve into, and complete their novels. It should be noted that while I used the same interview schedule, the direction each interview took varied significantly. Therefore, some sections of the results contain richer descriptions or more quotes from one author than another. My role as interviewer was to guide the way while simultaneously following the author's lead. I begin with a short description of how each author came to writing. Thereafter, two broad categories are examined. The first, titled "experiences while immersed in writing," includes the authors' descriptions of their experiences while beginning, working on, and completing a novel. The second section is titled "a step back." This includes meta-responses in which the authors took an analytic step back,

providing theories and thoughts about what occurs psychologically and emotionally during the writing process.

**Becoming a Writer**

While the authors' experiences of writing overlapped significantly, their paths to writing were quite unique. Christopher Paolini was born in Southern California in 1983 and grew up in rural Montana where he and his sister were homeschooled. He began writing *Eragon* (2003) when he graduated from High School. "I was bored," he said, "I was out of school, I didn't have a job, I didn't drive and the nearest town was a half-hour ride away, and we didn't have neighbors either." He was looking for a cause or a purpose:

> Something I could really devote myself to and get really good at. And not to put too fine point on it, I wanted to do something that would help me stand out from other kids that were homeschooled in the area. I grew up without basically anything and so I couldn't go buy toys or whatever. I wanted something for myself, something that I could point to and say, "Hey I did this!"

Writing was a project he could dedicate himself to fully and claim as his own. It was challenging, immersive, and fulfilling. Paolini also talked about being drawn to writing because of his love of stories:

> Growing up, stories and music . . . helped give meaning to my life. And on more than one occasion, when reading a book or watching a movie or experiencing a story in some other way, I would have an emotional reaction to the story that was visceral. I would quite literally get the tingles up my spine and my scalp would feel like it was crawling prickling or I'd get a rush of heat through my body if a story really did something wonderful. And nothing else in my life gave me that.

Paolini had a natural tendency to become immersed in and deeply affected by stories, which he utilized to then create his own fantastical world (See Appendix D for a description of the authors' works and writing style).

Like Paolini, Lethem felt a natural inclination to make art and write early on in his life and career. When I asked Jonathan Lethem why he began writing, he said, "In some ways living an artistic life feels like a preconscious decision to me. . . . When I hear remarks by writers about how they just somehow felt destined to do the thing, I think yeah, that's pretty much how I feel." Lethem also placed this in the context of growing up in environment in which "the creative, expressive act was dominant." His father was a painter, his mother a political activist:

> My mother was a flamboyant storyteller, a kind of a bon vivant, and loved fiction. . . . I grew up specifically making paintings, making inventive imaginative artifacts and I was never a very good student. So even before I'd switched to writing my preference for the invented thing, for the creative or expression gesture rather than some sort of reportorial or documentary expression was so extreme.

While in college Lethem realized that, in fact, he was more interested in pursuing writing than the visual arts.

Richard Russo had a more circuitous route to writing. He was working on his dissertation for a PhD in American literature when he realized that "scholarship was not for me and that was within probably six months of finishing up a career that was going to make of me what I had just come to the conclusion that I didn't want to be." He did find that studying literature made him a better thinker and changed his "worldview enormously because I was a small town boy from upstate New York." He said that studying expanded his "intellectual horizons" but did not alter his actions or daily life:

> [It] changed how I thought about social justice without necessarily putting me in motion. It didn't put me on any picket lines or move me to any particular kind of action other than teaching the novel that had changed the way I thought and teaching that novel to other kids and examining the themes that had moved me. But I could read a novel like *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Great Gatsby* or *Bleak House* without it changing my kind of day-to-day life.

It was then that he discovered creative writing. He found that writing had a more profound effect on him including his ability to empathize with others. In addition, he saw that "the only people that were having any fun were creative writers. And secondly, strangely, they were the ones who seemed to care the most about literature." Furthermore,

> There was comradery among those folks and a belief in literature and a belief that that was our shared purpose—to write. And then after the workshops and after the writing, whoever had been ripped apart that day then we all put ourselves back together again by going out and talking about our favorite contemporary writers. . . . There was just a lot of passion, a lot of joy.

Thus, in his words, "it was just a life changing experience, a life boat. I mean I just had something at long last to grab onto."

For Mary Doria Russell, writing fiction was also a shift in her life path. Previously, she had studied anthropology and worked as a paleoanthropologist. For several years she was also a freelance technical writer before that position fell through during a recession. While out of work, Doria Russell had the idea to write a short story, which she began in part because she thought it would make her a "better reader:"

> I had never written any fiction. . . .I thought I was writing a short story. It kept pulling me along. And, fortunately or unfortunately, at the time I was out of work. . . . So I had six hours a day that I could spend with my imaginary friends, something I've gotten very fond of doing.

While the book started off as an experiment, she became quickly hooked. The story was also a thought experiment. Doria Russell grew up Catholic, but she was curious about Judaism and was considering conversion. She said that the book helped her "clarify now that I'm thinking about bringing a religion back into my life and into the lives of my husband and son, out of intellectual honesty, maybe I should go back and take a look at Catholicism." At one point, she had her stepmother read the manuscript:

> I could see her shoulders go right up into her ears and if she had said anything discouraging I would've just said well ok, I don't think I could've thought up anything else that would've explained everything that had gone in the first two-thirds of the book as much as that did. And I was like "well it was an interesting experiment and when the economy turns around, I'm going back to technical writing and I'll make $35/hr."

Fortunately, her stepmother didn't discourage her.

Tova Mirvis began writing in high school while taking a journalism class. But she was first drawn to writing fiction during a difficult time in her life:

> [There was] a big falling out between my mother and one of her siblings and it was an ugly thing and the way that I dealt with it was writing a novel. I think it was probably the first piece of fiction I really wrote and again it was like the way of understanding what had happened. The only way I could make sense of it was on the page and there was a way in which it served as a consolation.

Mirvis found that she felt better if she could "put it into fiction somehow or write about it . . . to reduce a lot of uncertainty about what had happened and . . . reduce it to some form of truth." Thus, Mirvis was initially drawn to writing as a way of coping with and understanding a difficult experience.

Thus, in summary, the motivation for taking that initial leap into the world of fiction writing was unique to each author. For some it was a natural, smooth transition. For others, it was a dramatic, much needed change or an experiment that then transformed into a life-long journey. For all of them, this initial step propelled them into a life-long career and passion. (See Appendix D for a more detailed description of the authors' work).

**Why This Story?—Beginning a Book**

Several of the authors described the excitement of beginning a book. Richard Russo said,

> The most thrilling time is right at the beginning because you have a perfect book in your mind before you've written your first sentence and made your first mistake and realized that, yet again, words will be insufficient to the feeling in your heart and the idea in your head. And so there's that tremendous excitement, that sense of possibility that comes at the beginning.

Mirvis likewise described a sense of "open possibility" and anticipation at the prospect of applying what she learned from her previous book to her new project. Thus, before even beginning to write, the authors are often filled with a sense of anticipation and delight. But how do they know this is the story they want to pursue? Why these particular characters? This section explores how the authors make the transition from imagination to writing.

**The characters speak.** For all the authors I interviewed, the characters take on personalities before the writing commences. Often the voices come first. Richard Russo said that the characters come to him with "something to say:"

> Even the minor characters will be extremely vocal, right out of the gate. . . . [Rub's] first words to me were, 'You know what I wisht?' Have you ever heard somebody use the word wish and they'll add a 't' to the end of it? That's what Rub said. And the first thing I think he wisht for was a big old cheeseburger because he's hungry. But after the second or third time he said it, it became clear to me that he was a man who lives in his wishes.

Thus, Russo's characters have strong personalities and voices from the start. Russo spoke several times in our interview about feeling obligated to grant these characters the space to speak. For example, when describing the experience of completing a book, he said, "By the time I was finished with the book [*Empire Falls*], I was on to Lucy Lynch and to Sarah in *Bridge of Sighs* and these were people . . . who needed my attention." So for Russo, these characters become increasingly real until he feels he owes it to them to tell their stories. This marks the beginning of a book.

Similarly, Mary Doria Russell feels a book is emerging when she hears the characters speaking clearly:

> Dialogue is first. I know I have a book when I start hearing the dialogue. When I get the voices. And Doc was very clear. He would wake me up. You know there's a fine line between schizophrenia and what I do. . . . You're hearing voices and you're answering and taking them seriously. They say things and you're like, where did that line come from? Doc's voice was so clear to me.

So for Doria Russell too, the characters often feel as though they are independent, bona fide people—they surprise and speak to her even before she puts them on the page.

For Paolini as well, the main characters came to him "fairly easily" and began to speak early on:

> Saphira evolved a little bit because I wasn't originally going to have her speak. But then I realized it just didn't make sense to have her be as intelligent as she was and to not have her able to speak . . . I pretty much had her character from the very first line she ever says.

Jonathan Lethem also said that early on he has "thoughts about voices. Ways that my character's narration might sound, ways that their brain voice or their spoken voice might sound on the page." He, however, felt that often "people will credit their characters with telling them how the story works or writing it or whatever and I always think it's easy to overstate that, the truth is that you're making everything happen." On the other hand, characters that are sufficiently formed in his mind help generate plot:

> I try more and more to wait for all of them to feel like they have an opinion or a kind of reality principle inside of themselves. They have ways of behaving once you've made them that generates interest and implication, possibility for the story, and in many cases, especially if they're eccentric or decisive or impulsive or angry, they'll be plot generating. They'll make dynamic things occur.

Mirvis also spoke about character development as an aspect of how the novel begins and moves along. She usually models characters from parts of herself or people in her life:

> There's always one character who is the central character, maybe I think of it as the me character which is harder to write in some ways. And then each of the other characters

> are offshoots of . . . some central piece of myself. It's using almost like wax models. For my second book I used my parents as stand-ins. They always morph away in some ways. . . . You build your own shape and you don't need the shell anymore, you don't need the frame.

For Mirvis, then, the characters are manifestations of parts of herself or people she knows, but they gradually morph away from their original form as the story moves along.

Lethem's books often emerge from a combination of a strong character or characters and an interesting situation. For instance, in speaking about how he began *Motherless Brooklyn,* Lethem said, "Something clicked together. I was like, well a detective with Tourette's in Brooklyn and an orphan. It's like anyone would see that that kind of needs to be done. In fact it almost was like, that's so good that someone must have already done this." In addition, as Lethem described, good characters eliminate possibilities and begin to narrow the story down. "They have things that they exclude from happening," he said, "which is a really big part of what you are doing. Novels are big and inclusive and lots of stuff goes on, but you need also to shut down avenues of exploration."

**The appeal of specific genres and archetypes**. Several of the authors also talked about being intrigued by specific archetypes or genres. Lethem, for instance, said that there is "this power in these archetypes . . . that I wanted to find a way to translate into my own work." Later he expanded on this:

> You also find yourself working with literary archetypes. I mean you know I wasn't an orphan . . . and one of the simplest answers to that, is you know, David Copperfield and *The Prince and the Pauper* and Mark Twain and Dickens weren't orphans either, but . . . everyone wants to read stories about orphan children because you're tickling a part of

> everyone's brain that identifies with that. It exaggerates a part of the secret rupture of childhood, which is the constant discovery that you're inside the family but your fate is individual. So some of what I reach for has to do with wanting to participate in this.

Lethem, therefore, was intrigued by the possibility of participating in and utilizing particular archetypes or storylines that tap into universal human experiences.

For Paolini too, part of the motivation for telling the epic story of the *Inheritance Cycle* was the appeal of myths, symbols, and archetypes that inhabit the fantasy genre. When asked about why fantasy appeals to him, he began by saying that, prior to the industrial revolution, what people wrote about were warriors, monsters, gods and magic. "Those were the stories people were familiar with, and they had a mythic pull on people. Our very oldest stories are fantasy." Why specifically are people drawn to this genre? Paolini had clearly pondered this question prior to the interview, "(a) It's the oldest form of fiction we have and therefore it talks about our deepest fears and hopes and problems and joys and hates and that sort of thing and, (b) it allows us to externalize what is otherwise internal." In addition, he said, "You get to see and experience and go places that would otherwise be impossible. One of the things that makes us human is that we can dream, we can dream of things that never were and never can be and fantasy allows us to tap into that."

Why, though, the specific story of the *Inheritance Cycle*? For one, he said that, "The types of stories I tell all tend to revolve around personal transformation of some kind. You know Eragon himself becoming physically, mentally changed through his experiences. For whatever reason that's what appeals to me in a story." Furthermore, he came upon a story about a boy discovering a dragon egg and simply loved this idea:

> What appealed to me was the sense of secrecy in some way, as a young person having something for myself that no one else had, friends or family, something that was just mine. And I've always liked dragons, as a reader, so that appealed to me. And the sense of the quest that this initial incident, discovering a dragon egg, would set the character on a quest, a great journey, a great adventure.

Thus, Paolini chose the story of the *Inheritance Cycle* in part because he felt naturally drawn to the transformative, epic fantasy and because, like Lethem, he had a desire to tap into and play with longstanding, fundamentally human archetypes and forms of storytelling.

**Creating the world.** As the story evolves in the author's mind, the characters need an environment or situation to live within. As Lethem put it:

> [The characters] just float around and they look for homes. But really I don't fully believe in them or pay full attention to them until they begin to adhere to . . . a kind of narrative problem or environment or a narrative proposition. . . . It's the coming together of ideas about character or voice with one of those which then tend to advance in my brain at a much greater rate if they're going to work out.

For Richard Russo, on the other hand, the story primarily emerges as the relationships between the various characters develop in his mind:

> As soon as I begin to think about a character, I begin to see that character's father, mother, brother, sister, wife, and uncle. I just can't seem to bring somebody to life without bringing the whole group together. . . . Maybe it's just a feature of the fact that as soon as my characters talk I begin to learn about them and unless they're talking to themselves they need people to talk to.

In addition, for Russo, allowing characters to enter the story when there is a lag helps move the plot along. “A clearer road through the narrative would emerge for me,” he said, “just as a result of letting Janey into the story more or letting Wussy into the story.” Russo doesn’t usually know the ending to his books or how he will arrive at the ending, but he instead lets his characters and the unfolding story guide the way.

At times, the process is reversed—the situation, environment, or broader question is the starting point and the characters emerge from there. For example, Mirvis described having a lot of different interests and ideas that she begins to piece together. Regarding her latest novel:

> It started off with moving to Newton and thinking a lot about suburban life versus city life. . . . I thought about looking out windows and seeing neighbors in Manhattan versus in the suburbs. . . . I talk about exposure . . . the desire to be seen and the desire to hide.

Often Mirvis’ books are catalyzed by various questions and ideas such as these, and the novel develops as these pieces come together. Similarly, for Doria Russell the characters often emerge from a historical setting or question. For example, she said, “When Osama Bin Laden hit the trade towers, he said that they were in part retribution for the catastrophe of 80 years ago. And I’m thinking, ‘what happened eighty years ago?’” She had been meaning to take a year off from writing, but as she was reading a book,

> I get to the chapter about the 1921 Cairo conference, and I went ‘Oh my god, do the math! 2001, 21, that’s it! That’s the catastrophe.’ And that’s when I started thinking about, hmmm, how can I tell this story?

Thus, Doria Russell is often intrigued by an event or question that she wants to explore. Paolini too was thinking about larger questions and ideas when beginning *Eragon*:

> I was thinking about the relationship of the dragons to the land, I was thinking about the roles of men and women, I was thinking of Eragon's fears. . . . I was thinking a lot about the power of language and names and ultimately the entire series revolves around the power of language.

Thus, Paolini's books emerged from a combination of these topics as well as the characters that had arisen in his mind.

For Lethem, at times the idea for a book is so absurd or unique that he feels he has to prove it can be written:

> It becomes almost the opposite of 'oh that's a great hook.' It becomes 'no one would ever consent that that could be a book unless I prove that it can be a book.' And that's exciting too. When . . . I feel like I am the only person who could ever make that be true.

Another motivation for Lethem is that he begins to think, "Oh god there's like a set piece, I want to make this happen. I have to find a way to get to do this thing." Thus, Lethem summarizes his motivations for beginning a book by saying,

> The catalyzing energy for making the book is things the characters want, things they begin to require to stay real or discover their fates, and frankly theatrical showpieces that you are just dying to make occur. And it's a negotiation between those things.

At the very beginning of a project these various elements begin to come together: characters, environment, situation, questions, set pieces, themes and ideas. The order in which these aspects of the story emerge vary not only from author to author, but also from novel to novel. Sometimes research is required or extensive outlines and other times the story simply lives and develops in the writer's mind. In addition, some authors begin the writing process earlier in the development of the story, working out the characters on the page to a greater or

lesser degree. Some know how it will end and others let the story lead them there. However the author begins the process, the story starts to feel more and more substantial until the author is compelled to put it onto the page. Writing commences when the world and characters take on a sufficiently tangible reality. Lethem spoke about this explicitly:

> The drive to make something real and make it finished comes from the almost unbearable feeling that something that's real to you isn't real to anyone else yet and you've got to make it so. That it already is meaningful to you and you want to turn it into its property of persuasion . . . It starts existing enough for you that you have to make it really exist.

Richard Russo spoke about this too, as discussed previously, when he described the sense that he owed it to the new set of characters to write their story. There was also an intensity to the manner in which the authors described the compulsion to write a story. For example, Russo said, "Here's a whole bunch of people if they don't have my complete attention are going to be disappointed and pay the price." He feels a sense of obligation—that if he doesn't pay attention to the characters they will be "disappointed."

Yet for Russo the primary emotion at the beginning of the book is excitement. Doria Russell too became animated and spoke quickly as she described how she came to be intrigued by the various characters and ideas that eventually became her novels. Mirvis, Lethem, and Paolini as well seemed to have myriad questions, thoughts, and interests that pulled them towards their stories. Thus, as all of these aspects merge together into the embryo of a book, the authors feel as though they "have to make it really exist."

**Along the Way**

This section explores the authors' experiences while fleshing out a novel.

**Relationship with characters.** The authors' feelings towards and relationships with their characters often seemed as multi-faceted and affect-laden as real relationships. This could be gleaned from what the authors said about their characters as well as how they spoke about their characters. Russo said explicitly,

> You have to feel for them as you would feel for a real human being and presumably someone that you love and maybe even have feelings as strongly about as you feel about yourself. Or at least feeling strong enough to get you out of yourself.

Similarly, Doria Russell said, "I have to fall in love with somebody. I have to love somebody. And I have to like everybody else or at least understand them." The characters have to be loveable, likeable, or at least compelling for the author to want to spend time with them. "In *Dreamers of The Day,*" Doria Russell continued, "I got to make friends with Lawrence of Arabia." And later she stated, "I loved John Candotti." Doria Russell's feelings towards her characters varied from friendly, to maternal, to romantic

Russo too spoke about feeling fond of his characters, even the more challenging ones:

> I've had people come up to me and say [there are] characters in my novels, characters that they just despise. And I can understand why they do, but I really loved Mrs. Whiting from *Empire Falls* . . . she's much the sharpest knife in the drawer. . . . So it's not that I approve . . . of her behavior. But I enjoyed her company tremendously.

Taken out of context, one might think he was speaking of a friend or family member. The characters can elicit in the author a sense of pride, companionship, and entertainment. In addition, as Russo described, a character doesn't have to be easily likeable for the author to find him or her appealing. In fact, Doria Russell, said about her main character in *The Sparrow*,

> Emilio was probably the hardest one for me. . . . I think in real life I would have found

> him too scary. It took a lot of work for me to get to Emilio. . . . I started with someone who I didn't understand and I think that was the reason I was able to sustain the intellectual work that goes into writing a novel.

Characters that are complex and even somewhat mysterious can sustain the author's interest. It becomes a challenging, yet intriguing venture to delve into their minds and motivations. Mirvis described this when she said,

> The editor mentioned that what I say about my character who is a psychologist that he's more comfortable with his patients than he was with his family. And she was like 'you say that too many times. Can you deepen the idea, push past that initial knowing?' What is he really doing? Just trying to get deeper, dig deeper into the knowing of a character.

It is by digging deep that Mirvis begins to understand the characters' inner lives and actions. Paolini too said, "I put myself very strongly in the point of view of whatever character I'm writing about. . . . If you were showing them in a film for example the actions would only take a few seconds or a few minutes, but when you're describing the internal life and experiences of the character it just balloons in size. Thus the challenge is not only to understand the characters, but to also be able to translate this into writing. At times this comes easily and at other times it can be a slow, measured process.

There were also characters that had been developed by the author, but turned out to be dead ends. For example, Doria Russell mentioned times when she realized that she couldn't spend time with the characters she had begun to flesh out. For example, she pondered writing a book about Margaret Mitchell, but realized that "it was too close to my father and my stepmother. That there is this kind of enmeshed neuroses and they brought out the worst in one another. And I just couldn't spend time in there." Another time she had an idea to write about the

Lincolns, but realized that his wife "was major league nuts and he was cold. Couldn't do it, couldn't do it." Richard Russo too said, "If I can't find that empathy there, it's just a sign to me that maybe I should be writing something else or about somebody else." To write about a character the author has to be able to empathize with him or her to some degree.

The authors also described a sense of responsibility as the creator and invisible hand that decides each character's fate. Doria Russell, for instance, felt remorse after subjecting her characters to suffering. When she spoke about Emilio, a character in two of her books, she said, "Oh god, I did such terrible things to that poor man. But I do give him a daughter!" Similarly, Mirvis said, "It was going back to some willingness inside myself not to protect the characters, and in some ways I felt a cold-blooded decision to say let's push you to the brink and not to keep everyone safe and happy." The author is responsible for bringing great joy as well as tragedy into the lives of these characters.

In the end, it can be hard for the authors to say goodbye to the characters with whom they have spent tremendous amounts of time. Doria Russell said, "I let Anne and D.W. live as long as I could, because I didn't want to give them up as characters. I was very, very fond of all of them." Paolini too said, "It's hard, I still miss Eragon and Saphira." These characters are friends and foes, lovers, mothers, sons, and partners. Doria Russell said, "I had six hours a day that I could spend with my imaginary friends, something I've gotten very fond of doing, and that's what makes this just so intensely rewarding." These imaginary friends populate the authors' minds and hearts and often become companions for a time.

**Affective experiences**. All of the authors described moments of intense affect while writing. At times, the emotions arose while writing scenes in which they "subjected" a character

to pain or suffering. For example, Doria Russell described a particularly emotional moment when writing *The Sparrow*:

> I got up and went downstairs and turned on the computer . . . 3:00 in the morning, just got it out, and it appears in the book almost exactly as it was written in the middle of the night and then I shook for 20 minutes . . . [It was] emotionally intense. Horrifying. I had created a character who was funny, self-deprecating, brilliant, resourceful, strong, and emotionally stable. And he comes back wrecked. What does it take? It had to be something truly devastating.

When the author is affectively joined with the characters, their darkest moments resonate deeply for the author. Jonathan Lethem described being affected by moments of loss in his books. His mother passed away when he was 14. Lethem said that at first he didn't intend to write about loss, but it just kept showing up:

> I'll still be working on something that's likely to put me in a little crying jag, maybe 5 minutes. . . . There's one section where I just write this letter, she writes a letter, and it's to her absent father . . . And the letter just busts me up every time I look at it. I'm like 'Wow, I just wrote this thing that's a total faucet. I'm now talking about it, and I'm tearing up talking about it with you.'

Eventually Lethem made a conscious decision to use this natural inclination. "I have this obsession with re-describing the same basic emotional thing," he said, "and it happens to be an emotional thing that generates a lot of innate anxiety, sympathy, power, just sense of human presence. And so I can just embrace that." What began for Lethem as a surprising outpouring of emotion became a writing tool. He actively utilizes his own emotional landscape to generate stories that are imbued with this affect.

When I asked Russo about affective experiences while writing, he said,

> It's so embarrassing to admit. . . . It kind of borders on mental illness to describe this in quite this way, but there are times when characters, on the one end of the emotional spectrum just crack me up and I'll just be sitting up in my office just, I wouldn't say laughing uncontrollably, but I'm just so delighted by what they've done or something that they've said that I just gasp . . . And then there are times that I have brought myself to tears over something.

Later, he continued,

> It's not mental illness exactly, but you have lost touch with the real world. There's no doubt about that. You are living elsewhere for that period of time. When this person who doesn't exist, who has never lived, almost dies and you can't control the tears. Something not quite kosher is going on here.

This is similar to Doria Russell's words, "there's a fine line between schizophrenia and what I do." The characters can feel sufficiently substantial to evoke empathy, hatred, love, and any number of other emotions.

These emotions can serve as inspiration but can also pose challenges at times. Paolini said, "More than one time when killing a character I had tears in my eyes." He continued,

> It actually makes it harder to write sometimes because you're feeling these things and you're striving so hard to convey those feelings to the reader that sometimes you can go overboard and over-describe or you may under-describe because you feel it so strongly that you think just a few words are going to convey that emotion.

The challenge, then, is to translate these strong emotions into words. For Paolini,

> The hardest sense of emotion for me to convey is a sense of awe. Because that differs so much from person to person. . . . In some ways the films have it easier . . . you light it right, you do a slow pan upward, you let the orchestra come in with the swelling the music . . . and as an author the only music you have is the music of your words and that's so, so hard.

To convey emotions through one's words takes practice and diligent work. But Paolini added that you also "need a certain amount of messiness in your emotions and in the writing to sometimes capture brilliance because if you're just too mechanical you'll never get that."

**Challenges along the way**. Of course, writing isn't always a joyful, free-flowing process. At times, the subject matter taps into darker places. Russo described a particularly difficult period while writing a memoir that was primarily about his mother's life and death. "It put me in a place that I didn't want to be," he said. "I knew I had to write the book and I did write the book, and I'm proud of it and pleased with it, but it did send me someplace I'd have preferred to avoid." Around the same time, Russo began a novella about a professor living in solitude:

> As I began to write the story and the reason for his self-imposed solitude became more apparent and manifest, the story just got darker and darker and more and more despairing. And it wasn't really a ghost story anymore. This man was his own ghost. It was a very difficult, very dark story in a very difficult world.

At times a dark turn in the story takes the author by surprise. At other times, the writer knows it is coming. Lethem, for instance, said, "I'm going to be in the black hole of the thing that can never be healed, and I'm going to make more of my book out of it. . . . It's something you can accustom yourself to, but I can still feel my resistance to it or just simply my sorrow."

Paolini too talked about this in the context of the battle scenes: “The ones that took days or sometimes weeks to write, those got inside my head. It’s hard to spend eight hours a day thinking about violence. . . . So that was hard and I would sometimes dread it.” The characters’ experiences can elicit discomfort for the writer along with joy and pleasure.

In addition, while the authors described times when stories came to them easily and naturally, at other times the writing and editing process could be incredibly arduous. Russo, for example, felt that the writing process had begun to slow down for him:

> As a young writer I always had that sense that we’ll fix it in post, this’ll be fine. And that attitude is what seems to have abandoned me as I’ve gotten older. I want to fix it now and sometimes inappropriately soon. And so I think that that sense . . . of wanting to fix things earlier just slows the process to a grind.

Feeling stuck or slowed down can be difficult in and of itself. But Russo also feared that this was “some sort of new normal.” Russo spoke about this several times in the interview:

> My god this thing never should’ve taken as long as it did, and it shouldn’t have wasted me as much as it did, and I shouldn’t have made so many bloody mistakes. . . . So it’s really made me wonder if I’m crossing over into some sort of new territory. Everything about the process has become more difficult and I would have to say less enjoyable.

Russo, however, reassured himself that, “whatever this glitch in my process or in my head or in my imagination or wherever the hell it’s located, seems to be . . . at the benign end of the kind of spectrums that can paralyze authors, make them non-functional.” Despite the slowed pace of his writing and the dark turn it had recently taken, he was still able to write each day.

Editing too can be a painstaking process. At the beginning of my interview with Mirvis, she pointed at the manuscript on her coffee table, “I look at this and think this is half the book,

and that's 8 years of work!" With her latest book, she had to rewrite the ending several times. Mirvis had to do years of editing and rewriting, pushing herself to let the characters' "lives erupt." The writing can be difficult, especially when it challenges the author to find new directions and to bring the story to a fitting close. At times, one has to edit or start a scene over again. Paolini had to throw out and rewrite 10 pages of an important scene in one of his books. He also said that in writing the ending,

> I was obsessing over ever last comma and word, trying to make sure that the end was going to convey what I wanted it to convey, because this was the last chance I had at doing anything in the series. . . . And there was the deadline, which I didn't have with *Eragon*. So the combination of all those things made me become much more obsessive with my writing . . . I actually burned out on it a couple of times because I was working so hard . . . I started running out of ideas . . . I just became sick of what I was working on.

Thus, the writing and editing process can be challenging for myriad reasons.

**Joy of writing**. Despite these low points, all of the authors continued to feel drawn to write. Paolini, for instance, said, "Although I continue to write because of professional reasons, even if those were taken away I would always write because of the personal reasons." Doria Russell said that, besides the fact that it is a career that supports her financially, it's "something that's just big fun." Lethem said explicitly,

> It's such lucky work to do. I think because we're a very guilt oriented culture and because we're a very utilitarian culture, we have the protestant work ethic, people are always covering up the self-pleasuring aspect of writing with all this angst, and there's angst to be found. . . . But I think people often describe only that in fear of admitting how much pleasure they're taking in this work.

Russo talked about being inspired by an older friend with whom he worked on a screenplay:

> Wouldn't it be great if at 80 you still felt that way at the beginning of something when everything is a possibility and that moment when you realize . . . that you haven't spun your last story. . . . There's just so much that you haven't tapped into. And to see him at 80 with that kind of youthful glee at every time we'd learn something that we didn't know about one these characters and to see his excitement in particular, it was just wonderful.

So there is an immense joy when the author discovers that "the creative fountain is still flowing," that there are more stories, characters, questions, and worlds that their minds have yet to construct and discover. Russo talked about emerging from the novella and memoir and finding the screenplay "an absolute delight and a gift, just a complete gift." This joy seems to be especially strong at the beginning of a book, when there is a world of possibility ahead. But the authors also conveyed a thrill in discovering the story as it emerged. Lethem said, "You just want to surprise and delight yourself so that the reader has that same experience." This delight was apparent just as much in what the authors said as in how they talked about their books. They often lit up when talking about a particular story or character.

A few of the authors also talked about the joy of the language. Specifically, there was a sense of satisfaction when they felt that they had "nailed it." Mirvis said, "The pleasure of when you feel like 'exactly, that's exactly what it's like.' It's like being in search of those moments when you feel like you nail it right down the middle." Doria Russell too said, "I was like 'Oh yeah, boom! Out of the park.' It was just a moment where I was like, 'people are going to remember that.' Those are wonderful moments and just every once in a while, just the prose."

Thus, there was a simple delight in playing with language and translating their experiences, emotions, and ideas into art or, as Lethem described it, making "a magic trick with words."

**Finishing**

After spending countless hours fashioning a story and living in the characters' minds and worlds, is it hard to finish and say goodbye? The authors varied in their experiences of ending. At times it was quite emotional. Paolini said, "When I actually wrote the last few scenes of *Inheritance* I was an emotional wreck. I was a basket case. Which I actually expected after so long working on the series, but it was not easy to actually go through." Paolini had been writing this book since he was 15, for over 10 years. When I asked him to tell me more about his experience of finishing, he replied,

> I'll let you know when I figure it out. It's been an ongoing process. After having something dominate your life for that many years to move on past it is kind of a shock, kind of a challenge because I had to build new habits, work habits, life habits. . . . Even knowing it was coming and even wanting it to be done it's still a bit of a shock. Took me a year or two to adjust to the change.

*The Inheritance Cycle* had been a huge part of his everyday life for so long. He said that at times he still missed the main characters. However, he does plan to write a fifth book for the series. When I asked Paolini, "are the characters still floating around in your mind?" he replied,

> Not so much as in the past. Occasionally I'll get a good idea about them that I'll write down. But after spending over 10 years thinking about them I pretty much have it all worked out in my head so there's not as much to be mulling over at this point.

Paolini both feels the story is complete and also misses the world and the characters at times.

Doria Russell described times when she couldn't quite let go of a story:

> When I was finished with *The Sparrow* I wasn't finished. . . .You know it had come out, I had figured out what the end of the story was but I wasn't feeling better. I was there with [Emilio]. And like the father general, I felt I needed to bring this guy to some kind of resolution. I also had more ideas about what happened.

Therefore, she wrote a sequel that drew the characters' stories to a close. However, most of the time, the authors felt that when the book was out of their hands, it was truly finished. Doria Russell, for instance, said, "People say, 'Are you gonna go back to science fiction?' If I ever think of a story that needs science fiction I'll do that again. But I was done with them. I had said everything I needed to say. I was finished." Lethem also said about his characters,

> I actually feel a really distinct sense of discharging them. . . . People will say, 'Well of course you're going to write about that character again,' and I've always felt like sequels are utterly prohibited. I feel like I fulfilled the terms. . . . And some of that's part of the same restlessness in me. . . .The three to five years of writing a book is a lot of time to spend with the characters and in that world and that I'm really excited to satisfy the terms. I kind of have a mournful goodbye with them, but that's within the doing of it, in the last chapters.

So Lethem feels a sense of having a contract with his characters and story. He says goodbye and satisfies the contract's terms as he draws the story to a close.

For Russo, finishing is often "a non-event. I just move on to the next one." He spoke of spending a lot of time with characters and feeling ready to move on:

> You really are sick of their problems by then. And you feel like Sully with Rub, at one point Sully says to Rub, 'What for Christ sake do you wish for now?' But also, by the

> time you finish a book and then you go out on the road with it and read from it and all of that, and if you were tired of it before, by the time you finish with a book tour you're really tired of it.

Russo also felt that it was harder for readers to say goodbye to characters than for writers, because in writing you spend much more time with the characters and have the experience of resolving their stories.

In addition, all of the authors spoke of having a new story in mind either before finishing or shortly thereafter. As previously discussed, Richard Russo talked about feeling he owed it to these new characters, "Miles and Tic, as much as I loved them, I had moved on, and their stories were resolved. Whereas here's a whole bunch of people if they don't have my complete attention are going to be disappointed and pay the price." Even when the authors intended to take time in-between books, they often felt quickly compelled to start writing again. Doria Russell said,

> After I finished writing *A Thread of Grace*, the idea was to take a full year off. That was seven years that went into that book. So I was going to take a year off and I saw this history channel show about Lawrence of Arabia and I went "aw man,"
>
> Interviewer: You didn't take a year off?
>
> Doria Russell: I lasted 36 hours.

Mirvis also talked about starting a new book: "It's exciting to take what I've learned and start something else, and try to figure out how to take what this book taught me and use that in the next book." Lethem too talked about returning quickly to writing. When I asked whether he misses writing when he's taking a break, he said, "I pine for the feeling of the great involvement, of being in that sacred zone where I'm making some really large book real, as I said before that

only I can do, and it needs me so much." On the other hand, after specific books, he described feeling drained:

> Each of those two books was so encompassing that they satisfied a lot of my feelings for a kind of formal pressure to express or encompass my ideas. I just feel like, 'wow I just put all of that together' and it just leaves me a little drained mechanically as well as emotionally.

In addition, Mirvis said,

> This book, I feel like I've sent it off so many times thinking it was done, three or four years of 'It's done.' So I almost don't believe in the notion of done anymore. But I feel like this version would be the publication version and so it's the feeling of, 'Have I said all I know about this?'

Russo too said, "Once a book is published, like it or not, if you continue to start thinking about these characters, chances are you're going to think about something that you should've done and didn't do." Things could always be added and altered. But the book is published. It is simultaneously a natural and forced goodbye.

**Writing and the Rest of Life**

**The writing lifestyle.** The degree to which the authors felt a clear division between writing and their personal lives varied not only from author to author, but also from one time to another. For Paolini, "The task of writing *Eragon* itself was so all consuming that it just sucked me into the world." He went on to say,

> I end up becoming very introspective, even more than normal when I'm deep in a book . . . . All of my thoughts throughout the day are directed toward the scene I was just working

> on, the scene that's coming up, how it all interconnects. . . . It's always going around in my head.

In fact, for Paolini the book was "so omnipresent in my day-to-day existence that I didn't really think of much else. So in some ways they were more real or at least more present in my thoughts and that could kind of make it difficult to deal with anything else." Thus, when an author is deep in a project, it can be challenging to transition back into daily life. This seems to especially be the case when something is unresolved in the story. Russo, for instance, said,

> When I'm writing well about [the characters] and I put the pen down or stop clacking at the keyboard, I'm generally done. If, however, I've made a mistake or a series of mistakes . . . then they stay with me because I know in some way I've betrayed them. I've had some sort of failure of imagination. The story's going off the rails and I tend then to think about them for the rest of the day. . . . Barbara [Russo's wife] notices . . . and she'll say, 'You're not really here are you?' and I'll have to confess, 'I'm actually having dinner with Lucy Lynch tonight, I'm sorry I seem to be talking to you, but . . . '

Lethem, similarly, becomes distracted in his daily life when he feels he hasn't spent sufficient time writing:

> The only thing that makes me unpleasant to live with or unpleasantly distracted or not in my daily life is when I'm not working on the book enough, when I've broken the continuity with it, broken the contract with the story too much lately, and I'm just feeling like it's dying on the vine. . . . And then paradoxically I'm less able to go away from it and back into daily life.

For Paolini, the transition back to "daily life" can be difficult for other reasons as well:

> One of the difficulties of being a writer is if you tend to be a little obsessive, which you kind of have to be to finish an 800 page book . . . you spend all of your time during the day thinking about consequences. If this character does X what is going to happen and you immediately in your brain start working out a chain of events that can extend days, months, years, decades, centuries into the future. And the problem with that is when you're going into your regular life . . . trying to think about paying the bills or dating someone or going to the grocery store, your mind immediately starts racing down all these possible avenues and building up these possible timelines which is not the healthiest thing to do.

The mental state one enters when writing a book can be inhibiting in daily life. In addition, Paolini talked about the writing lifestyle being difficult for authors for another reason:

> Many of the people who are drawn to writing as a lifestyle tend to be the sort of people who actually find their weaknesses exacerbated by that exact lifestyle. As in people who tend to write are often people who have a very strong internal life, a very strong imagination. They tend to be introspective; they tend to spend a lot of time by themselves. . . . So then when it becomes their profession they end up spending all of their time alone, listening to the voices in their heads, creating imaginary worlds, sometimes putting their characters through incredibly difficult situations. That can end up exacerbating all of the problems sometimes that introverts tend to deal with normally—isolation, social anxiety, depression.

Paolini, however, said that he was able to overcome such difficulties due to several factors:

> I'm fortunate that I have a very strong family and they help keep me from getting buried too deeply in my head. I've also had the fortune of having been sent on a lot of very large

> book tours. And I also had to learn how to market and sell the self-published edition of *Eragon* back in the day so I never had the luxury of 10 years all by myself essentially becoming ever more introverted. . . . In some ways I'm an introvert who can fake extroversion.

In addition, the authors I spoke with seemed to have found ways to transition from a writing focused state into the rest of their day. Lethem said,

> I think about it the rest of the day, but only in a kind of really pleasurable way, almost like a reader waiting to see, to pick up a book that they're enjoying reading. And sometimes if I've come to a little dilemma, I'll find myself worrying . . . .But increasingly, I've solved so many of these over the years and accepted that sometimes it's just a matter of waiting or sitting with it or fidgeting that I don't have a lot of leakage of anxiety or stress from the problem solving into my daily life.

In addition, Lethem talked about balance as an ongoing task:

> There's this sort of fantasy that someday you'll clear everything out and be only writing. But I think the urge to complicate that accompanies the fact that you usually need to complicate that or modulate that in some way, that actually it has to be balanced against other things. And so learning to do so is a kind of rolling, lifelong experience. You never master the balancing and the ingredients change somewhat and present new faces. But again you can at least gain a kind of underlying confidence that "okay, well I've always been able to balance it, and look, I do write the books anyway."

Thus, the authors described balancing writing and life as being a challenge, but an inevitable and surmountable one.

**Sending it out into the world—exposure and feedback.** These authors are seasoned writers who have experienced their share of criticism and praise, book tours, and fan mail. They have learned to attenuate to some degree their fears of how their work will be perceived. On the other hand, dealing with the public response to their writing was not always easy and can still be challenging for them at times. A few described how the published book is a “snapshot,” something that cannot ever be changed and will be read differently by each person. Mirvis, for instance, said,

> It is scary, the feeling of this is the book that will go out in the world and it’s permanent. Whereas you keep learning things and changing your perspective. . . . *Ladies Auxiliary* is a snapshot of who I was 13 years ago . . . and it’s so strange that someone could pick up that book for the first time and talk to me as if it’s now.

Russo too said,

> It usually takes about a year for a book to come out, and then you have to go on the road and pretend that it’s all new and exciting because it is for the people who are reading it, because you owe that to them, it’s new and exciting to them.

In addition, readers have myriad reactions and interpretations, including ones quite different from those the author intended. Doria Russell said,

> I am surprised by the number of reviews of the book that came up with people feeling that Emilio found his faith again at the end of that book, and I’m thinking, ‘Haha! No! Nuh-uh!’ They were clearly reading *their* version of this.

Similarly, Mirvis talked about the book as a Rorschach: “People read the book they were going to read regardless of what book I wrote. But it said as much about them as it did about me . . . It’s fascinating. Some people loved Batsheva, some people hated her.” In addition, people often

interpret the fictional elements of the book as truth and the characters as one-to-one reflections of real people in the author's life. Lethem talked about this several times:

> This new book that I just finished is another one like *Fortress* that is going to put me in that realm of constantly having to sort out, 'well yes this and not that.' And even if you're not feeling defensive about it, which I think I mostly manage not to be, it can just be wearisome to realize, oh god, I've just got to keep pointing out, 'well actually I made that up. And it's nice that you feel sorry for that character, but actually that didn't really happen to me.'

Doria Russell too said that she was "really frightened" that people would think that she was "espousing" the views she wrote about in one of books. Particularly, she was trying to get inside of the mind and motivations of a Nazi doctor. Mirvis too said, "There are readers who are looking for the, 'Oh my god look who she wrote about' and understand it in a one-to-one way as opposed to everything is transfigured."

On the one hand, this one-to-one correlation is inaccurate. On the other hand, authors *are* revealing creations of their own mind and drawing from their own experiences. Mirvis described a sense of exposing herself when she sends a book out into the world. This was particularly challenging for her because she was exploring her doubts, fears, and wishes about her marriage and Orthodox Judaism, knowing her community did not always leave room for questioning. She said that "the first book was scary, letting people know what I thought." Paolini too talked about the challenge of sending the book out and receiving criticism:

> We like to think of ourselves as civilized but in many ways we're still monkeys and when the tribe starts turning against you and throwing coconuts at you it can be hard to deal with that. You just have to not take it personally because these people don't know you.

Paolini said that it was harder at first to hear criticism because he "felt as if at any moment everything that had happened with *Eragon* could vanish, could all get taken away."

**Coping with criticism.** For all of the authors, it took time and experience to learn to let go of criticism. Mirvis described this as "trial by fire:"

> I feel like writers by nature are very thin skinned which is what I want to be in some ways as a writer. But trying to separate it out and say like I am not going to feel every slight or every nasty glance, to just separate from the book in a certain way . . . to be able to tolerate dissent, or controversy or dislike, can you tolerate people disliking you, or disagreeing with you or being angry at you? You build up a tolerance level for that.

Mirvis also talked about realizing she couldn't or didn't want to keep quiet simply because she feared people's reactions. She learned to say to herself, "I don't think what everyone thinks, and I'm going to say it, you can't stop me from saying it. It felt scary, but I felt like, 'What is the alternative? Sit down and shut up?'"

In addition, changes in Mirvis's personal life made it easier to send out the book:

> I think that if I were still in my orthodox married life trying to be someone I was not I think this book would be very, very hard to contain. It would be hard to metabolize that inside the world I was in. Now I feel like, 'What difference does it make?'

In addition, remembering the motivations for writing a book can be an essential element to letting go of criticism. Paolini, for instance said, "There are advantages and disadvantages of fame. . . . Ultimately, I did not do any of this for that. I did this because I had a story I wanted to tell." He had the advantage of having sold millions of book copies. "Does it sell?" he said, "Because that's what's going to let me continue writing in the future as a career. I mean if Dan Brown listened to the people who didn't like his work, he'd never write another word in his life."

Despite his success, however, Paolini also still found comfort knowing that he could not control the reception his books would receive and that every book garners criticism:

> Ultimately you have to write for yourself because you can't please everyone no matter how hard you try. And it gives me great satisfaction and comfort that no matter how good of a writer you are, someone somewhere hates you. I could just go out on the street anywhere and find someone who hates Dickens or Melville or Jane Austen or Shakespeare very, very easily. . . . And in some ways eliciting strong reactions from people means that you did at least something right. It's better than someone just looking at your work and going 'eh." . . .Ultimately the solution is to be confident in who you are and happy with who you are and realize that you can't control the things that you can't control.

Mirvis too talked about learning to accept that not everyone's going to like her works. She said that "you have to accept not everyone's going to like you, not everyone's going to like your book."

The authors also spoke about how what ultimately mattered was whether the books resonated with readers. Mirvis said,

> People who felt they were outsiders for some reason loved it. . . . [There is] the hope that if I feel like this, other people do too. They'll be the naysayers always but it's knowing there's going to be someone or lots of someones who quietly, whether they say it publicly or privately, feel like 'Oh that names the feeling.'

Doria Russell too said,

> It's been 20 years since I wrote [*The Sparrow*] and I just got an email again today from somebody who has found it very meaningful all these years later. And I think that the

> reason that they work so well for so many people is that in this crew that I've put together, you've got everybody from a flat out atheist . . . and at the other end of the spectrum you've got a full blown bridal mystic who experiences God. . . . So no matter where you are on the spectrum you feel you have been represented.

Paolini's readers have expressed their connection with his books in unique ways:

> I get letters from people who tell me that *Eragon* was the book that got them into reading. Actually that means more to me than just about anything else . . . .I think every author dreams of that, of knowing people are going to enjoy your writing. See this sword behind me? For one of my birthdays . . . a whole bunch of my fans pulled together about $500 and had this replica of Zaroc made for me. So to know that there's that kind of devotion in your fan base. . . . It's a little daunting, but it's amazing.

In addition, it's been 10 years since the release of *Eragon* and "there are already people who have grown up and had their own kids and are probably going to pass their books on to their kids. So that already blows my mind."

Yet Paolini also talked a fair amount about how praise has a darker side. "It gives you a sense of responsibility towards the story and characters," he said, "You're not just trying to do a good job for yourself, you're trying to do a good job for the readers." The pressure becomes immense when you know millions of fans are reading your book. At times it made him self-conscious writing:

> It can also be just as hard to hear praise because let's say someone praises something in the book that you did without thinking about too much, something you did unconsciously as a writer. And then all of a sudden you're self-conscious about that thing. So when you sit down to write again it can mess with you.

Thus learning to take both praise and criticism lightly is an important aspect of being a published writer—or at least a more content one.

**Book tour.** While this was not a planned topic for the interviews, the subject of book tour was mentioned by several of the authors. While they described it as rewarding to see that people enjoyed their books, often they also experienced going on tour as an interruption. Lethem said,

> I'm very aware that I'm going to be on book tour in September and October in a heavy duty way for *Dissident Gardens*. And that itself will pull me back into that project in certain ways and keep me from moving forward. And I feel acceptance about that.

As quoted earlier, Russo too said, "Then you have to go on the road and pretend that it's all new and exciting, because it is for the people who are reading it." So there is an acceptance, but not always an enjoyment of the process. Paolini has gone on multiple, worldwide book tours:

> It's a real swing to go from writing and then doing the publicity. And they're really two different career paths. And of course the publicity I've done has been rather extreme on the scale of things. And what they don't usually tell you is that doing the publicity . . . can actually be extremely isolating. Because every day you're interacting with a new batch of people you don't see them again the next day. You're spending your time alone. . . . It is an alienating experience being on a long book tour, very rewarding but very odd at the same time.

Paolini also spoke about training himself to feel more comfortable doing public speaking by remembering that,

> People actually do want to like you most times. You get up in front of an audience to talk, the audience didn't come there to have a bad time, they came there to have a good time. So if you go up and you are confident and controlled, even if you don't feel confident and

> controlled, if you display that, people will enjoy themselves, and if you do that long enough you start enjoying it yourself.

In fact, for Paolini a huge part of what he has gained from book tour is that it has pushed him to, "interact with people all around the world, learning to present in public, learning to sell my books, learning how to do television interviews, learning how to deal with criticism." When it comes to feedback, both positive and negative, Paolini talked about how ultimately,

> You can't take it too seriously because at the end of the day it really has little to do with my day-to-day life, my life with family, my writing and all of that. Everything else is nice, but it doesn't have a lot to do with who I am as a person. And keeping that distinction clear is important.

Thus, the authors value their relationship to their readers and accept and at times enjoy their interaction with the public. However, in the end they primarily continue to write because of the process and pleasure of the creative act itself.

## A Step Back

This section focuses on moments during the interviews when the authors adopted a more analytic stance, reflecting on their motivations for writing, the interplay between writing and the rest of their lives, and the ways in which writing impacts them intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, and interpersonally.

**Writing as allowing for intellectual exploration and learning.** At times writing a novel requires extensive research, especially when historically based. This research is part of the appeal of writing for some of the authors, as it is an opportunity for exploration of myriad places, people, and historical periods. Paolini, for example, said that writing "helps give you a broader base of knowledge . . . because you're always learning new things, researching things." Paolini's

research was wide ranging, including learning about German mythology, sword forging techniques, and old English and Norse. Lethem also had to do extensive research for some of his novels:

> In the case of something like *Fortress of Solitude* I had to do a lot of carpentry . . . to fit my singer into the history of soul music. That entailed reading all the liner notes of all the CDs I already loved and listening to the music endlessly and fantasizing about my guy can fit between Bill Withers and Marvin Gaye. So that was a pretty delicious kind of research.

In addition, at times Lethem's research included interviewing friends and family about their experiences. "I had to hear what other people felt about it partly to see the ironies and the humor in my own impression, to surround it better." This was especially important and meaningful in writing *Fortress of Solitude* because it allowed him to learn how his own experiences were shared and also unique. At other times Lethem found the research for his novels tedious but necessary to make the novel and characters believable:

> I had to get up to speed about the American Communist movement, read a lot of stuff that was really forgettable . . . You have to have that sensation of mastery . . . just have background awareness to make my characters live in the world that I wanted them to live in. But I don't thrill to having to do tons of that kind of drier, more deliberate research.

Doria Russell, on the other hand, said about research, "I love that aspect of it. It's continuing education for me." This is a huge part of the appeal of writing for her. "I personally like to learn," she said. "The idea of going back over my own shit is of very little interest to me. I'm more interested in finding other things out, I like to go into other people's lives." For *A Thread of Grace*, Doria Russell travelled to Italy with a Jewish man who had been hidden from the Nazis:

> We went up to this village where he and his father had been hidden for about 11 months. . . . This woman came out of this little stone house, and he said, 'Señora, do you remember me?' And she looks at him and goes, 'Oh! Alfred! Come here come here! This is Alfred I told you about him in the cave!' He is a part of this family's history, the village's history. Oh my God, it was so amazing to be there and watch that.

Most of the time, however, Doria Russell's research process does not require travel. At one point in our interview, regarding her background in anthropology, I stated, "in a certain way instead of going to other countries this is your way of exploring foreign cultures." Doria Russell responded, "It really is. Yeah, it's a way of exploring." In addition, in order to understand her characters, Doria Russell said, "I need to know what my characters know." At times this includes gaining skills and knowledge the characters possess. For instance, she said, "Writing *Doc* was especially fun for me because he's so well educated and he has all these classical allusions and I read Homer and Virgil for the first time." She also learned to play piano to gain an in-depth understanding of her character's love of the instrument.

Despite the extent to which Doria Russell enters into other lives, times, and places, she emphasized that writing for her is not an escape. She said,

> I have a splendid life. I enjoy where I am. And often I'm writing about places that I find really difficult, you know they're not places I would particularly want to be. . . . You know, I am enriching. It's not an escape to learn to play the piano at this age, it's enriching.

Thus, the process of researching and preparing for a novel has the potential to enrich the authors' lives and expand their knowledge base.

**Life and book intertwined.** The writers all described the intertwining of their books with

their personal lives. Paolini said, “My personal experiences usually end up in the books in some way or another. It might be a little disguised, but they’re usually in there.” At times, the authors described consciously using material from their lives. Jonathan Lethem for instance, kept finding the theme of loss showing up in his books, and so noted, “Well maybe I should take a very direct glance. And in fact, the first couple of chapters of *Girl in Landscape* depict aspects of my mother’s death in a way that none of the other ostensibly more realistic books have ever done.” At other times the authors described being surprised in retrospect by how their personal lives showed up in their fiction. Paolini, for instance, said, “I will look back on the books and sometimes realize that there are some interesting parallels between what the main characters are going through and what I’ve gone through in my life during that period.” Mirvis seemed to have this experience frequently:

> I happened to end up with a book which mirrors my life dramatically. . . . Each of the books I feel like, ‘of course this is why I wrote this book’ even if I couldn’t have articulated it on the front end. I feel that more than ever now the interplay between the book and life.

Personal issues and events from one’s life often show up in one form or another.

The authors often use parts of themselves or other people from their lives to create characters, as Mirvis described previously. Paolini too talked about how the character Eragon began as a reflection of himself and how Angela, another key character, possessed a personality similar to his sister. Russo also said, “I loved spending time with Miles Roby and his daughter Tic because there was so much of my own relationship with my daughters in that book.” Doria Russell too talked about the characters representing parts of herself:

> Anne and, oddly enough, the father general were both me dealing with Emilio. . . .

> Anne's an anthropologist, she's got a lot of my own background . . . intellectually curious but much more social than I am, and more athletic. She was willing to go to another planet, I won't even go camping. Forget it. And then the father general is a much more disguised version of me and I was not aware that was me until a friend told me that . . . I'm not a 79 year old male CEO of an international corporation, but yeah.

However, several of the authors also cautioned against drawing too direct a connection between the characters and people from their lives. Lethem, for instance, said,

> There are pieces of life put in, but in really deceptive ways . . . you'll be in the book but distributed, broken into several characters or even that someone else can be distributed amongst several characters. Like when I talk about *Chronic City* I'm just helpless. I'm like, well Perkus Tooth is me and Paul Nelson and Michael Sidenburg, but then again Richard Adneg is Michael Sidenburg and me.

Mirvis too said that, "People will look at the character of the husband and say that's Mirvis's husband . . . But it's so much more complicated." Similarly, Lethem said,

> It's right to feel its got autobiographical sentiment in it, but actually the details are crazily contradictory and wrong . . . and there's somewhere where Philip Roth says this very adeptly . . . the problem with the question is not that it's not germane. The problem with the question is that the conversation usually stops at the answer, when in fact that's only the starting point of the work. It's just how you got started, you work from life, and then what? It's everything that came after that's really of interest.

In our interview, I said that there is a natural desire to understand the connection between the author's life and book. In response to this, Lethem said,

> Books like Roth's or a book like *Fortress* benefit energetically, they benefit from that. It's not as though the writer's oblivious. The writer themselves becomes energized and fascinated by pulling some of the juju out of real personal histories and transferring it into the work. . . . It makes you lean forward. It gains the writer all sorts of superpowers in terms of manipulating attention that you're thinking that a little bit.

Hence, the author can utilize the desire to work out truth versus fiction to draw in the reader. Ultimately, however, there isn't a clear one-to-one correlation between the book and the author's life. In fact, authors at times fear pondering this subject too closely as they believe it may actually hinder the writing process. Russo expressed this when he said,

> It'll be interesting as you talk to other writers to see if anybody can explain to you where characters come from . . . There's a way in which most writers I know are fairly superstitious about talking about where characters come from because we too are aware of how deep the mystery goes and if we were ever to figure it out that might be the thing that turns off the tap.

**Naming.** Several of the authors spoke about writing as an act of adding something substantial to the world. Lethem said,

> Thomas Berger has this quip where he was asked, 'Why do you write?' And he said, 'Because it isn't there.' Which is a play on the old 'why do you climb mountains? Because it's there.' I'm just trying to add something to the world to look at. It's like the instinct to make an artifact. And I love books and I love stories and I'm amazed that they spring out of people's brains and I want to join that party. In a very pure sense it's an additive gesture. No one ever wrote a story like this before.

At a basic level, therefore, there is a human desire to add something to the world. Writing fiction allows one to utilize and put into words one's experiences to create a tangible work of art. Mirvis said, "Sometimes I think, 'Is this my attempt to explain myself or explain why I felt what I felt?' But, I also feel like it's my attempt to name some truth in the world." Mirvis went on to say that if life is imperfect, "at least you can make something artistic out of . . . to reduce it to some form of truth." Mirvis continued,

> I want to name how I feel. . . . [I try] to catch something illusive in words like can you catch a feeling, a phrase, a look someone gives . . . going after it with a little net. Can you catch it and put it in your computer? It's in the world fluttering around and wanting to take hold of it in some sense, like pinning a butterfly.

There is a certain power in putting one's experiences into words. Naming at times is an act of expressing affect and giving voice to discontent, as Mirvis said, "Can you give voice to unhappiness? What happens if one person voices discontent?" Lethem said,

> [It] becomes a matter of pride and exhilaration to use so many of my emotional resources with a conscious and adept capacity. . . . It's one of those things where I feel like, I'm in the right line of work. I have this obsession with re-describing the same basic emotional thing and it happens to be an emotional thing that generates a lot of innate anxiety, sympathy, power—just a sense of human presence. And so I can just embrace that.

Naming, therefore, can also be an act of "claiming" one's experiences, both positive and negative. Lethem, for instance, said, "I was fascinated by what I'd experienced growing up. And, like anyone, I took it for more normal than it was." So he began "playing with it as a subject matter. I would brag about it and tell weird stories . . . about the culture of bullying, the specific, as I call it, racial fear of the kind of sub-criminal scuffling that went on in the streets of Brooklyn

when I was a kid." His book *Fortress of Solitude*, describes an act he experienced frequently called "yoking," in which he was bullied and robbed, but coerced into going along with the pretense that it was just a joke. Here Lethem talks about claiming this experience as his subject:

> It was an exalted feeling to claim it as my subject. . . . One of the features of the yoking is that it wasn't mine to name. . . . Even after I figure out, 'Oh, wait, that specific kid isn't going to fight me and beat me up if I say what happened.' But even after that it was unnamable in its gestalt. So when I was like, 'Oh wait a minute, I can turn this into my badge, and my fame, and my story.' It's deeply pathetic in one sense, to be like, 'Now I'm the famous yoked guy.' But it's when I placed it in my art and when I placed it in the world, even by identifying things like figuring out . . . that yoke was much older slang than I think anyone who was using in the '70s knew . . . This is much deeper than the participants grasped, you know what we were doing was this rehearsal of this macho thing.

For Lethem, then, taking this repeated experience and placing it within his art was quite powerful. He teared up as he described feeling "pathetic." But it was also revelatory to claim the subject and find that he was not as alone in this as he had believed.

What exactly is the power in claiming and naming one's experiences? Lethem and I talked about how the yoking was a koan—a Zen proverb that has no rational answer, but that, when "realized," can have a profound effect:

> Lethem: The answer to being a student who's been posed with a koan is not to answer the koan, it's to become a teacher. Someone who poses koans to other people.
>
> Interviewer: And the answer to koans are non-rational, emotional realizations.

> Lethem: Right. You're changed by hearing a koan, you're not going to arrive at a reply to a koan.
>
> Interviewer: Which is kind of what the book is. It's not a solution to yoking, there's no answer. It's claiming it.
>
> Lethem: Claiming it, it's also just filling in the area with description.

Like a koan, a novel can describe an experience that cannot be rationally "explained" or "solved." Lethem said, "That there was something that had gone on between another boy and me that was . . . knowing in a way that nothing less than that whole novel could say." A novel can embody the complexity and nuance of one's experiences. Lastly, Lethem said,

> I very much like saying extensively this is a way the world is, where I think it hasn't been said. I mean *Dissident Gardens* extends from that impulse over and over again. I just feel I *am* a witness to all sorts of ways of feelings and living, moments that past, situations, counter cultures, arrangements in the human story that are worth getting right . . . Not righting injustices or correcting records but just adding to the descriptive heap of human testimony.

There is a pleasure in putting into the world an account of what one believes, witnesses, feels, and experiences. This naming can act, as Mirvis puts it, as a consolation:

> If life looks like the way it does, imperfect, at least you can make something artistic out of it . . . It felt better when it happened if I could put it into fiction. . . . The consoling piece of it was on the page you can capture something in a way that in life you can't. I mean the consolation is like the truth. . . . There's a way in which it feels better to . . . create something of it that really captures what it is. I think I started writing that way.

Furthermore, Mirvis talked about this act of naming as a way of "ordering" her experiences. Writing allows the author to make a piece of art out of the messy imperfection of life.

**Exploring multiple perspectives.** Mirvis said about being a writer, "It's a way of being in the world I feel so fully, every experience is processed through writing." She described how, while getting a divorce, "Writing the essay is how I understood what it meant to me. I couldn't have processed it the same way." Paolini too said (paraphrasing an author whose name he couldn't remember), "writing is the cheapest form of therapy. It lets me explore my questions and issues of the world in a safe and controlled manner."

The author has an opportunity to engage in this type of exploration vicariously through the characters in his or her novels. Mirvis said in our interview, "I feel a novel to me is a space to really, really settle in for a long time, come at it in different ways and different perspectives." Many of the authors articulated this in some form—that in writing they are pushing themselves to see the world from a variety of viewpoints. Mirvis continued,

> I'm fascinated by different perspectives. I think this and you think this. The bizarreness in some ways that there can be no consensus on what is or isn't and no clear right or wrong. I feel like fiction lets you muddle the question of 'am I right here? This is what I feel. Am I wrong?'

Mirvis's first piece, in fact, was a conscious act of playing with the variety of views of an event in her family:

> There was an allegation of sexual abuse made in my family. So was it true or not true? And the whole book . . . is this story of a happy family true or is this darker version true? Which is the truth? And the impossibility of knowing either

> one, but at least in writing to ask the question of truth or non-truth, perception and reality and to write about not knowing which version to believe.

So one doesn’t necessarily find a single truth through writing, but fleshes out a variety of perspectives. Writing, she said, is a way “to try to examine it again and again.” She talks about this in the context of writing her second novel:

> I felt like *The Outside World* was all about my Orthodox issues. It was a way to come out of all the characters angles to be like ‘what if you felt this way, and what if you felt that way, and what if you felt this way.’ And I guess fiction doesn’t always offer a resolution, which is why maybe you can get away without having to act on the answer because I don’t think fiction should give you the answer but more like a wrestling.

So, for Mirvis there is a direct link between subjects she is contemplating in her own life and those that the characters are working through. The characters, in a way, do the debating for her, but don’t necessarily offer an answer.

Lethem too said that in writing, you are “comparing different stories and by generating multiples, discovering your freedom to navigate between them. There’s somebody who makes this remark about history, you can’t tell the truth but by comparing all the lies you can feel the truth.” Again, you don’t necessarily come to some concrete answer or truth, but you perhaps can “feel the truth.” “Our experience is made out of multiple subjectivities,” he continued, “It’s why the novel is such an irreplaceable vehicle to capture what it feels like to deal with being alive. Because it kind of insists that you suspend understanding until you’ve surrounded it with multiple subjectivities.” We have numerous parts of ourselves or views of the world and the novel reflects our ability to navigate between these perspectives.

In *The Sparrow*, Doria Russell too looks at religion through the lens of characters with distinct personalities and beliefs. As discussed earlier, this was in part a way for her to examine a variety of perspectives to try to decipher her own beliefs. She went on to say that with writing, like with anthropology, “you start with a very narrow understanding and you would need to have an idea of what the rest of the world is like. You need to expand that from other points of view.” Thus, the diversity of perspectives offered by the characters allows the authors to actively explore their own beliefs, experiences, issues, and questions.

**Examining specific topics and questions.** The authors spoke about how the novel allows them to ask questions and examine topics in which they are interested. Paolini stated that he dislikes stories where “things go unexamined that . . . real people would stop and talk and think about because it impacts them. . . . It’s always bothered me in stories when people don’t ask the big questions.” Instead, Paolini often scrutinizes moral and ethical topics through his characters:

> Usually I’m consciously trying to examine X, Y, Z. . . . If you decide that, ‘Hey I would like these characters to think about this issue,’ there are ways to do that that are natural for the characters without preaching to the audience. So for example Eragon spends a bit of time in the series thinking about religion, the religions within Alaegesia and how that influences the world and where his position on that is. Also the morality of killing both for food and for self-defense, those are all issues that the characters think about. But I will say that the conclusions that the characters arrive at are not necessarily mine.

Again, the author is discovering his or her own answers by examining the characters’ perspectives, both those that resonate for them as well as those that do not. In addition, for Paolini, writing about a character around his age was a way of exploring his own transition into

adulthood. “A lot of the books that I was reading at 13, 14, 15 were books about young people coming of age,” he said. “So writing about that myself again was a way for me to understand adolescence and the change I was going through from boy to man.”

As discussed, for Doria Russell, the act of examining religion from multiple perspectives was a way of working through her own questions about religious belief:

> What this book is doing for me is to clarify now that I’m thinking about bringing a religion back into my life, and into the lives of my husband and son, out of intellectual honesty, maybe I should go back and take a look at Catholicism. I’ve changed a lot since 1965. The Catholic Church has changed a lot since 1965.

Like Paolini, she found that some of the characters’ perspectives made sense to her and others clearly did not:

> Felipe Reyes says, ‘Not even a sparrow can fall without your father knowing it.’ The sparrow still falls; doesn’t do the sparrow a whole hell of a lot of good, to know that God’s eye is on the sparrow. . . . I felt that that was something that I didn’t buy, which is one of the reasons I did not go back to Christianity. [But when] I had to write the homily for Mark Robichaux to say at the funeral. . . . I found that when I pushed my characters into a wall like that, I found that as an individual and as a writer what I wanted to do was give them Jewish perspective on what just happened.

For Doria Russell, then, putting herself strongly in the shoes of a variety of characters allowed her to decipher which rituals and beliefs resonated for her and which did not.

Mirvis too was working through her relationship to religion in her first two books:

> My first two books were all about religious issues and I think that I was able to ask them on the page or ask them in the persona of a writer writing about orthodoxy but not in my

> actual religious life. I have been Orthodox my whole life . . . and so I feel like my first two books really were about . . . my wrestling with 'Could I fit into this world?' and 'What do I really think of this world?'

For Mirvis, then, the specific questions she was asking and how they were tied to her own life were not always apparent until after the book was complete:

> The book, maybe before I knew it, became a place to think about 'what does it mean to feel stuck inside of a marriage? What does it mean to feel trapped? What does it mean to be made to feel smaller than you really are?' The book is a safe place to ask those questions even though ironically you are writing it for mass audiences, for public consumption.

A book is a private space to look at one's deepest questions and yet, if published, will ultimately be seen by untold others.

At times it is easier to ask one's questions on the page through the guise of characters than in real life. Mirvis said, "You can work out questions in your writing, but not allow them to be part of it yet. . . . The religious piece has been huge in terms of being able to ask questions in writing that I wasn't quite ready to ask in life." The full extent of this separation occurred to her when she was talking to someone about feeling trapped and this person asked her, "Have you read *The Ladies Auxiliary*?" In Mirvis' latest novel, her characters were exploring difficult marriages and relationships, questioning whether to break up. It wasn't until later that it became clear that this was her own question:

> I was basically coming to the recognition that this marriage did not work. . . . I was trying to make these characters ask all the same questions I was asking about life and marriage and religion and relationships and all these things and then have no one go there as a

> result of these things. . . . There's a line that haunts me from an earlier draft that says something like how 'she thought she could live, travel on the rails of her imagination and that would be enough.' And I feel like no, it's not enough . . . it's an interplay, a conversation back and forth.

So the novel is, in Mirvis's words, "a test case." At first it felt easy to pretend the characters' questions were not fully her own. But she found that "once you open your eyes to a question, you can't 'unknow' it." Mirvis said that in the end,

> I guess I feel like I know the deeper answer to the question is inside me somewhere, that I know it in some ways, I just have to find it. I think I always felt frustration in writing that the answers to the questions I had were not going to come from anywhere else . . . no one can do this for me.

So for Mirvis, writing doesn't provide answers, but helps her discover what she already knows.

Russo spoke about exploring questions about the future through his writing. He often writes "ten years down to the road" as a way to look closely at situations he may encounter in coming years:

> *Straight Man* I think was a book about a man's relationship to his daughters after his daughters were grown, despite the fact that my daughters at the time were still little girls. But I was wondering, 'My God, what's it going to be like when they're grown? What happens when they're married? What if they marry someone I don't like? Or what if one of my daughters ever married a man who hit her?'

When I asked, "So it's the unknown you're exploring?" He responded,

> Um, yeah. And sometimes trying to fend off particular events. *That Old Cape Magic* was written in the knowledge that both of my daughters were going to be married within the

> next year and a half. So suddenly I was writing about . . . disastrous weddings. . . . If you can make an enormous porch collapse with all the wedding guests, pitching them into a privet hedge, then there's a pretty good chance that the actual weddings will stop well short of that!

Writing allows him to create catastrophic scenarios—real life could not be worse. When I asked him whether his writing does, in fact, help him prepare for the future, he replied,

> Yeah, I think that was certainly true of *Straight Man*, especially Hank's relationship with his daughter. I think it was a way of me preparing myself to be a different kind of father to a 19 or 20 year-old daughter. I think it kind of helped me get there.

Later he talked about this "preparation" in the context of writing *The Risk Pool*, "My father was very ill when I wrote that book. . . . And that was an exercise among other things of me preparing for his death. Getting to play both parts for a while in preparation for the day when you'll have to forever." Through the lives of fictional characters, Russo both examines the past and looks into the future. "In *the Risk Pool* and *Nobody's Fool* both, I was already looking back on that youth that I no longer was. . . yet again looking into the future and looking at the past as well."

**A study in empathy.** At the end of our interview, Paolini said, "I think writing done properly helps give you a greater appreciation for the way other people view the world." This was a thread that ran throughout the interviews. Fiction authors use their imagination to put themselves in the mind-frame of those who are different to a greater or lesser degree from themselves. In Russo's words, it can act as "a study in creating empathy."

***Fictional characters and historical figures.*** Russo explicitly said that when writing characters,

> It's something that's not you and yet . . . for the period of time that you're sharing their lives, you have to feel for them as you would feel for a real human being and presumably someone that you love and maybe even have feelings as strongly about as you feel about yourself. Or at least feeling strong enough to get you out of yourself. To disassociate yourself from yourself for the period of time that you're spending with this fictional person which is both empathy and I suppose that ability that we all need from time to time to just get out of ourselves, to get over ourselves.

One is learning to empathize with characters that solely live in the mind. But writing from their perspective is an act of suspending one's assumptions and beliefs and imagining what it would be like to live in another's mind and body. At times, the author's task is to understand or empathize with a fictional or historical figure. Paolini said of that one aspect of the writing process that was transformative was,

> Learning to write from the point of view of characters who were very different from who I was at the time. The hardest one was Arya. I was not and am not a 100 year-old elven princess. And if you had to choose a really hard character for a 15 year-old boy to write, that's probably one of the harder ones. . . .The trap I would always fall into was I would view her the way Eragon viewed her, not the way she actually was.

When I asked him what was transformative about this and if he does believe that it helped him understand perspectives different from his own, he responded,

> I do. But only if you're being honest about it. Because it's really easy to let your unexamined assumptions/prejudices creep in. . . . A lot of what I was doing in the *Inheritance Cycle* was actually commenting on the fantasy genre in some ways, on certain things that I felt were assumptions or areas where I thought there was a lack of

> empathy. I mean for example I started in the first book with the Urgals being your stereotypical cannon fodder monsters who terrorize everyone and by the end of the series they're close allies of the humans. . . .So I don't have any characters who are born evil, all of them became evil. Writing about that helped me understand and hopefully helped the readers understand them.

So to write authentically about a character, one needs to see the world through that character's eyes for a time. Doria Russell talked about this too:

> I became Verner Shrump, and I needed to understand what it was like to be a Nazi doctor. . . . Verner was a deeply mediocre person, and he just barely got through medical school, and a lot of jobs opened up when thirty percent of the doctors lost their jobs in Germany for being Jewish. And he knew that was the reason he was getting a job so he is self-aware enough to know that he's not hot stuff. He's skeptical and yet he's taking advantage of it because it's coming down the pike and he's got a wife and a kid and he's got a baby on the way and he's not going to say no. All of a sudden he's making money.

In order to create a character whose actions were despicable, she had to understand his motivations. When I asked her how she develops this understanding, she said, "Well I always go back to the childhoods. I have to know the childhood of every character . . . I need to know at least one generation back." In order to have some empathy for a character, she needs to understand how his or her past molded them into who they are.

In *The Sparrow*, Doria Russell tells the story of a culture clash in which the characters that visited another planet made fatal errors in understanding the ways of this world:

> What happens in *The Sparrow* is, as Emilio says in *Children of God,* everything we thought we shared, everything we thought we had in common—food, music,

> family—that's what we were most wrong about. Because you don't know you're making an assumption until it's taken from you. You just don't. There's no way to anticipate that.

This was in part a commentary on Christopher Columbus, "I was trying to say with that book . . . don't be so hard on Columbus . . . They had no idea who they're dealing with. They don't have a single common word. . . .You're gonna screw it up. . . . They were of the time, not of their culture." In *The Sparrow*, then, Doria Russell is exploring the profound consequences of ignorance and misunderstanding and simultaneously empathizing with the mistakes people make.

So, while some characters are not necessarily likeable or at times even perform evil deeds, the authors described the necessity of understanding their motivations. As Doria Russell said,

> Everybody is real and human. They're all doing what they think is the best they can. I've never met anybody who gets up, first thing in the morning and looks into the mirror and says 'I'm really gonna fuck up today. By God, I'm gonna screw my life up and I'm gonna make life a living hell for everyone else.' Nobody does this! People get up and they intend to do things right.

Similarly, Richard Russo said, "An artist friend of mine said to me once that most people if you grant them one or two assumptions most of what they do in their lives logically proceeds from those." By fleshing out the characters' assumptions and intentions, the author comes to understand, empathize with, and write truly about these characters.

***Unresolved relationships****.* At times the authors described either consciously or inadvertently writing about people from their past or present lives, particularly family members, in order to try to understand them better and to come to terms with specific aspects of their

relationships. Doria Russell's mother was a strict Catholic and a black-and-white thinker. "I grew up in a family," she said, "where everybody but me knew the truth. It was, this is how it works, this is what's right, this is what's wrong. Very rigid." Doria Russell, on the other hand, was always questioning and trying to grasp matters on a deeper level:

> My mother would say, 'Oh look at that cloud,' and she's thinking 'it's gonna rain,' and I would come up with the whole theory . . . And she's like 'Oh, for Christ's sake, Mary Rose, give it a rest!' And it was like that with everything. Because she sees the particular and I see the global.

Doria Russell tried to develop some insight into her mother's life through her writing, especially in *Dreamers of the Day.* Doria Russell said, "I'd never done first person, probably won't do it again, and it was much more autobiographical. It was definitely me working some stuff out." She continued,

> Agnes, the 40 year-old school teacher, she's me as I would have been if I had been raised by my grandmother. . . . It was, okay, let's put me in my mother's situation . . . Agnes has my intellectual curiosity, and my mother did not. It took me a long, long time to understand that unless you live in Lake Wobegon not everybody is above average, and my mother was just not a great intellect. And I think she was intimidated as well as being confused by me.
>
> Interviewer: Did the writing help you come to that?
>
> Doria Russell: Yeah.

So in writing Agnes, Doria Russell had to put herself in her mother's shoes. For one, it led to the realization that her mother was inhibited by her own intellect and confused and intimidated by

Doria Russell's. Later, with *Doc*, Doria Russell was trying to understand her mother's response to her illness:

> She went through three big things of chemo and radiation. And it was just brutal. And I didn't understand . . . she didn't want to die. She wanted to live. She wanted to live. And I just didn't get that, it just didn't make sense to me.

Again, Doria Russell was trying to grapple with the dramatic differences in their personalities. In addition, by writing Wyatt and Maddy's relationship in *Doc*, she was trying to understand her parents' relationship:

> The relationship between Wyatt and Maddy Blaylock in some ways was an echo of my dad with my mother. He really did have to remember her coffee was terrible and he really would put cream and sugar in it to kill the taste. He always had to remember when they were out to have it with the cream and sugar so she didn't know. In some ways you say that 'Aw, isn't that sweet?' And then you think, 'Wow, they're lying to one another on such a . . .' You know, couldn't you just say something? You know I had to kind of, as I got older, when the marriage fell apart, I had to sort of try and understand better how that worked.

Thus, the act of trying to place herself in her parents' situation was again an attempt to try to grasp the motivations for their actions.

Russo too returned to his childhood home and his relationship with his parents through his writing. For example, I asked him, "Do you find that certain characters emerge at certain times in your life?" He responded,

> It's all fairly straightforward in the sense that my early books when I was a much younger man were very boy stories. Most of the characters in them were male. And that was a

> result of the fact that my parents had split up when I was young and my father was the greater mystery in my life—why did he leave? He was an incredibly charming and very entertaining man to be around, but when somebody like that who's that central to your life is just gone 99% of the time, you spend a lot of time in longing and yearning and in trying to solve that mystery of absence.

Again, the writer is attempting to work through or at least revisit unresolved relationships from the past. Russo continued,

> I wrote [the memoir] for the same reason that I write my novels . . . because there were certain things about my own life and my relationship to my family and that place that I didn't understand. And I had been telling people things for years about Gloversville about my mother's life about the family that I grew up in, and sometimes people would look at me strangely. . . . And I realized that some of those things that didn't ring true to them . . . didn't ring true to me either. There's a way in which we keep going back to, why does Dickens keep returning to orphans? Something unresolved there.

So, again, the novel can be a place to look deeply at complex relationships from the past and to try to come to terms with gaps, misunderstandings, and painful events from one's personal history.

**Action and inaction.** At times, the author is not just exploring or asking questions, but taking action vicariously through characters. For example, standing up for the misunderstood is a theme throughout Doria Russell's novels. As discussed previously, while growing up Doria Russell felt profoundly misunderstood by her family. In her writing, she often feels maternal towards her characters and tries to understand and explain their actions. She said, "I tend to be

drawn to characters who are not well understood." Later, she talked about a few specific examples of this:

> Doria Russell: This child who was a mixed race child, he's half black, half Indian . . . And he's extraordinary. He's bright. He likes to learn. And I thought it will be 135 years before a kid with that background can be president. I wanted to make his existence a void in the story. I wanted everybody to react to how they missed him. Because there are so many kids like that that were just taken out of it. Story's not about them anymore. Because they were too bright or they were uppity. And they pissed off the wrong person.
>
> Interviewer: So again taking care of someone, taking that role.
>
> Doria Russell: Yeah, trying to keep people safe . . . be as much as they can be.

Doria Russell felt this instinct to protect and defend several other characters, including Morgan Earp who she saw as primarily a plot device in other versions of the story. "He gets killed so that Wyatt and Doc can ride out to avenge his death . . . and I thought that boy deserves better than that. He deserves to get his voice back. He deserves to be recognized for how important he was to everybody in his family." Doria Russell felt this maternal instinct when it came to Doc Holiday. Here she describes Doc's mother:

> Doria Russell: She would see what was in that kid's eyes and just go to bat for him . . . . That was something that was really alien to me. I did not grow up with that. My mother's attitude was, 'What did you do that the teacher said that to you?' It was always my fault. So I was totally unprepared for the roar. You know the huge reaction.
>
> Interviewer: Well it sounds like you continued to do that through your books.
>
> Doria Russell: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.
>
> Interviewer: Reversing what your mom did in a certain way.

Doria Russell: Yes, in a lot of ways.

Interviewer: So you did that for Doc?

Doria Russell: Yes. Yeah exactly.

So Doria Russell fleshes out and tries to understand people's stories deeply, especially those who have been misunderstood in the past. She feels a natural empathy for her characters—something her parents, for the most part, did not provide.

In addition, Doria Russell felt that for her mother, the "biggest disappointment of her life was her children." Through one of her characters, Agnes, Doria Russell was able to tell off her own mother:

> She learns how to Charleston on the ship and somebody offers her a cigarette and she thinks why not? You know, and she's drinking and she's dancing—and this of course is something she did not do before. And her mother is in her head saying, 'I just knew it! The minute I'm gone you fall to this level,' and Agnes in her head just says, 'Oh momma! Shut up!' She gives it to her finally. Finally gets her own back! . . . Agnes finally manages to break free. And I figured okay now that I have told momma off . . . what's next?

So in the simplest sense, Doria Russell was able to tell off her own mother through Agnes.

At first the characters in Mirvis' books also behaved in ways and made choices that she was not able to make in her own life. She began to wonder whether she could "watch people" or write about the characters without their questions and choices seeping into her own life. In her latest book, *Visible City*, this took the form of a woman living in New York City who watches her neighbors through the window. Mirvis said,

> In some ways the test question for the book is, can we watch people and not get involved? Is voyeurism an innocent crime? If I spent my life imagining someone else, if the interaction only takes place inside my head, is there still an interaction? Can life stay inside our minds?
>
> Interviewer: So you were in some ways the woman watching from the window?
>
> Mirvis: Yeah.

Regarding this question of whether she could live within her mind and her stories without it influencing the rest of her life, the answer was yes, but only for a time. At first she did not realize that the questions her characters were struggling with were her own.

> Now I feel like, oh my God, I could just go through and label what each piece is about. . . Did life follow the book or did book follow life? They absolutely intertwine. I obviously wrote this book because I was wrestling with these questions, but I didn't know it.

She continued in this vein, "With fiction there's the guise of hiding. . . . I told myself this is just a character, it's not me, I'm not doing this, I'm not feeling this. . . . You sort of hide inside the mix of fiction/nonfiction."

In addition, the characters are in a sense acting things out for the author, which may temporarily provide some sense of relief:

> For a long time it was easier to be bold in a book then to be bold in life, and it felt like also my first two books were all about religious issues and I think that I was able to ask them on the page or ask them in a persona of a writer writing about orthodoxy but not in my actual religious life. . . . I feel like I worked out my disillusion with it on the page but never with it in life, and that catches up to you.

Things started to change with Mirvis' latest book. Those who read her original draft of *Visible City* said that not enough happened in the book. "The editor who ended up buying the book said, 'You're mired in molasses. I want to see the bold Tova, the Tova who takes a risk. I don't want to see the Tova who ducks away before it gets complicated.'" At first, Mirvis said that she rejected this feedback. But slowly she realized that she could not protect her characters:

> The old version they all went home safe and happy. I was trying to say and then they do this and then they do this but if you go past here you can't go back safe and happy so everyone come home because it's incompatible or impossible for me to think that they could go past that point and it was too risky for me personally. Too scary.

But gradually she realized that it didn't work for the book, and it didn't work in her own life:

> [I was] trying to force a false ending onto a book, make sure everyone's ok at the end and coming to the realization like, no that's not true and they're not ok. And the book is better for that recognition, but like being ready to push life to the brink and being ready push the book to the brink.

She was coming to this realization about her book at the same time that she was wondering whether to file for divorce:

> Last spring was when I was really wrestling with could I really force myself to suck it up and stay in something I knew didn't work. That's when I was recognizing what was wrong with the book. It was completely intertwined. In the book she does not like her husband.

When I asked what it was like to finally change the ending, to let "life erupt," she said,

> It was a relief. It was scary. I was aware of how resistant I had been for so long in the book. I was aware that the problem had not really been the book that it had been my own

> sort of clenched unwillingness to be free in terms of what could be said. I think I wrote with a tremendous amount of anxiety about what people would say. . . . It was almost a nauseating knowledge . . . that this doesn't work for me and it's not going to work for characters and it's not going to work for readers to sell and I don't feel like there's an answer proposed but some sense of being willing to name the what is . . . by the what is I mean unhappiness, betrayal, disillusionment, a mix of all those things that can't be washed away easily or can't be put back together, to let things out of the box. And once things came out of the box to know that there was no easy return from that.

So once Mirvis began to see the connection between her books and her own life and let the characters say and do things, she couldn't turn back. "It's like a test case almost," she said, "Once you open your eyes to a question you can't unknow it." Ultimately, Mirvis was going through the divorce as she was simultaneously writing and editing the book with the new ending. "When the dust settles" she said, "I would love to write about the way in which they were always conversation, the book and my life. The book would become a little bolder and then I would become bolder in my life. Back and forth." Ultimately, Mirvis said, "We all gain a lot by not wanting to see. We do it because it's helpful and beneficial in lots and lots of ways. It was helpful for a long time . . . but a book that doesn't want to see is a flawed book."

**Slowing down and paying attention.** "The other thing that writing always does for me is the thing that art I think is supposed to do for everybody," Russo said, "It asks us to slow down. . . . If you do slow down as a result of taking a photograph or painting a painting or writing a poem, the effect of that in the rest of your day is to get you to slow down too." Russo continued,

> Furthermore I think there is a way in which the practice of art, if it slows you down, it gives you an opportunity maybe to be a better father, a better husband. . . . It gives you the possibility of not missing things because you're in haste.

So the pace and attention that writing requires has the potential to impact how one relates to others. At times Mirvis too talked about the heightened awareness instilled by the act of writing.

> It's trying to tune in to dynamics that are at play and paying attention to interaction. . . . When I'm really writing I feel like everything is practice. To see someone do something and say what would you call that if you were writing a sentence describing the way she looked at that person? What words would you use? . . . Everything is up for unfolding and looking at, nothing is supposed to just roll on by.

So writing can push you to pay attention and put your observations into words. Mirvis continued,

> I think it puts me in heightened awareness of the complications of every interaction. Last night my friend was telling me about how his son is doing this and this person is doing this and I was just like 'God do you ever just get so sick of people?' The combination of interactions at play, it's infinitely complex.

So while this heightened awareness can have positive effects, it can also be stifling and overwhelming. As discussed previously, Paolini too found that this awareness could at times make it difficult to transition back into everyday life. For him, "One of the difficulties of the process is that you spend all of your time during the day thinking about consequences," which, he goes on to say, makes it difficult to move smoothly through life and make efficient decisions. The frame of mind elicited by writing can be both beneficial and impinging in everyday life.

**Writing as deeply mysterious.** Despite the detail and complexity of the authors' explanations and descriptions, at the heart of many of their answer was a sense of the mystery of

writing. Where does their passion for writing a particular story come from? From where are the characters and landscapes of their imagination born? Often there is either no easy answer to these questions or the answer is more complex and multifaceted than can be fully articulated. As Doria Russell said, the motivations for writing are "over-determined." The mystery of motive is, in fact, an essential part of the art form. There was often a sense that over-analyzing the source of their inspiration could, in fact, put a stopper on it. When I asked Richard Russo where his excitement at the beginning of a story comes from, he said,

> Well it's that sense that we all are mysterious even to ourselves. When you find that kind of joy, that sense of possibility. . . . When you can get this excited about something it means, among other things, that even though this mystery that you've been plumbing as a filmmaker or as a novelist, you keep diving into this well and every time you do you think maybe you've hit the bottom, and if you've hit the bottom that means there's no place else to go, nowhere else to investigate, you know yourself as well as you're ever going to, which means maybe you're done. But when you discover that that floor maybe was a false bottom, that there's someplace else in the cave that you haven't been to yet, there's a mystery of the experience of the self that's not just a retread of something that you've done already but a brand new adventure.

So the mystery of where a story comes from is directly tied to the mystery of the self—that we are bottomless and ever changing and there is always more to explore. To illustrate the mystery of motive, Russo went on to tell a joke about a hunter determined to get a "trophy bear."

> The first time he goes into the woods he sees something move and he's brought this great cannon of a gun. . . . He's knocking branches off of trees and when the gun is empty . . . there's a tap on his shoulder and he turns around and there's this enormous bear and he

> can speak and he says, 'what are you doing?' And the guy tries to explain that he was there hunting and he says, 'well you really need to reexamine your motives, and to help you along. . .' and the bear demands a sexual favor. So the next time this guy comes into the woods he's armed even more heavily, he's even more determined to kill the bear so this times he's got a bazooka and the third time he comes into the woods he's got a flame thrower, and each time the bear is right there, taps him on the shoulder, demanding an even more disgusting sexual favor. And the last time . . . the bear taps him on the shoulder and says, 'You don't really come here for the hunting, do you?'

The hunter believes he is there to hunt. Yet there is another motive at play that he is less willing to acknowledge. Similarly, a writer's true motives may be convoluted and hard to access.

> [The joke] goes to the question of motive and to the mystery of motive, why is it that when a story is not going well or when it takes a direction that is disturbing to the author and another person might say well all right this is my story I'll just find my way back to the kind of story that it was when it started, exert authorial control over it. Why shouldn't I be able to make this story the way I want to? The fact that you continue to go back to something that's not fun and it's not what you intended and in fact you never signed a contract, and you can just quit or you can try to enforce your will upon the story, and why, what is the motive?

So there is both the mystery of where the story and characters emerge from as well as the difficulty of knowing one's deeper motives for writing. Ultimately, Russo said, authors "are aware of how deep the mystery goes and if we were ever to figure it out that might be the thing that turns off the tap."

## Discussion

How would the hunter in Richard Russo's joke reply if we asked his reasons for donning camouflage and trekking back into the woods each day to search for that bear? Perhaps he would respond, "I enjoy the quiet of the woods, the elation and sense of possibility that come with the hunt." Maybe he dreams of the praise he would receive from capturing a trophy bear. If he was a particularly analytical hunter he might say, "My father was a great hunter and despite the fact that he is no longer alive, somehow I feel that finally I might gain his love and respect if only I could catch that bear."

In the end, these multiple layers of motivation are not mutually exclusive, but play upon each other and make the hunt all the more compelling. Furthermore, the pleasures derived from hunting and the motives for doing so are not necessarily part of the hunter's conscious experience when he or she sets out into the woods. The author interviews pointed to a similar truth—the experiences of and motivations for writing fiction are nuanced, multifaceted, and innumerable or, in Mary Doria Russell's words, "over-determined." This discussion does, however, aim to explore the variety of experiences reported by the authors, specifically focusing on their motivations for writing as well as the impact writing has had on them in turn.

This study began with the following broad question: What is the experience of creating and living with a fictional story? To some degree, this question is answered with the full narrative of the authors' experiences presented in the Results section. However, this discussion delves further into the details of the authors' experiences in light of other sources. Research from a variety of fields as well as interviews, essays, and articles by other authors will be utilized to support and elaborate upon the descriptions offered by the authors interviewed for this study. Fundamentally, two separate but linked questions will be explored: Why do these authors write

and how does the act of writing affect them personally?

**A Love of Story**

Choosing the writing life was a dramatic shift for some of the authors I interviewed and a natural evolution for others. Despite their different paths to writing, they all described a sense that they had found the path they were meant to tread. Jonathan Lethem, for instance, said, "When I hear remarks by writers about how they just somehow felt destined to do the thing, I think yeah, that's pretty much how I feel." Richard Russo spoke about how writing "was just a life-changing experience, a life boat. I mean I just had something at long last to grab onto." In addition, the authors described a magnetic, almost addictive quality to writing. Paolini said, "Although I continue to write because of professional reasons, even if those were taken away, I would always write because of the personal reasons." What initially drew them to writing and what keeps them going?

At one point in our interview, Lethem said, "It's such lucky work to do. . . . There's angst to be found. . . . But I think people often describe only that in fear of admitting how much pleasure they're taking in this work." From what does this pleasure arise? Writing is primarily a quiet, solitary endeavor. The authors type away for hours each day, living in their minds much of the time. Yet their descriptions of the writing life were far from dull. Writing was portrayed as an intricate, challenging, and fully engaging act. Furthermore, over and over again the authors expressed a love of story itself. Sometimes this was explicit, as when Christopher Paolini said,

> I would have an emotional reaction to the story that was visceral. I would quite literally get the tingles up my spine and my scalp would feel like it was crawling, prickling or I'd get a rush of heat through my body if a story really did something wonderful. And nothing else in my life gave me that.

Likewise, Lethem stated, “I love books and I love stories, and I’m amazed that they spring out of people’s brains and I want to join that party.” The authors’ delight in story was also noted in how they spoke about their novels—often their eyes lit up and their speech accelerated when describing a particular character or plot point.

The writers also talked about the excitement of beginning a book and the sense of open possibility when sculpting a new narrative. Sometimes they shifted through numerous stories and characters that arose in their minds until they discovered one that caught their attention. At other times a story was so compelling that they felt it simply had to be written. Lethem, for instance, said, “You begin to think, ‘Oh god there’s like a set piece—I want to make this happen. I have to find a way to get to do this thing.’” Doria Russell too described this irresistible pull of a story several times:

> After I finished writing *A Thread of Grace*, the idea was to take a full year off. That was seven years that went into that book. So I was going to take a year off and I saw this history channel show about Lawrence of Arabia and I went, “Aw man.”
>
> Interviewer: You didn’t take a year off?
>
> Doria Russell: I lasted 36 hours.

Thus, the authors all described becoming hooked by a story and then diving deeply into the process of shaping the plot, the world, and the characters.

**The Writing State**

**Narrative transport and flow.** This love of story rests upon a solid foundation—the unique, human ability to become engrossed in narrative. Whether drawn to non-fiction, world news, literary fiction, or celebrity gossip, we revel in story. In an article examining this love of story, Jeremy Hsu (2008) wrote, “Storytelling is one of the few human traits that are truly

universal across culture and through all of known history" (para. 4). We have the unique capacity to momentarily forget ourselves as we spontaneously translate words into images and identify with characters' thoughts and feelings. Green and Brock (2002) coined the phrase, "transportation into a narrative world." When transported, a person's attention and affect merge with the story. Narrative transport is, of course, also one of the requirements for and pleasures of writing fiction. In a study conducted by Taylor, Hodges, and Kohanyi (2002), 50 fiction writers were interviewed and given the Bernstein and Putnam Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES; 1986), which measures people's propensity to become highly engrossed in activities. The authors scored significantly higher than the average population on several of the DES scales. This data, along with the interviews, led the researchers to deduce that "the profile of writers that emerges . . . is that of a group of people who readily adopt other people's perspectives and who revel in the imaginative worlds of fictional characters, fantasy, and daydreams" (Taylor et al., 2002, p. 377). Fiction authors appear to have a strong capacity for and love of being transported into the lives and worlds of their characters.

The authors I spoke with described this state of deep absorption. Lethem said that when not writing, "I pine for the feeling of the great involvement, of being in that sacred zone where I'm making some really large book real." Paolini too said,

> I end up becoming very introspective, even more than normal when I'm deep in a book. . . . All of my thoughts throughout the day are directed toward the scene I was just working on, the scene that's coming up, how it all interconnects . . . It's always going around in my head.

He went on to say:

> The task of writing *Eragon* itself was so all-consuming that it just sucked me into the

> world. . . . [It was] so omnipresent in my day-to-day existence that I didn't really think of much else. So in some ways they were more real or at least more present in my thoughts and that could kind of make it difficult to deal with anything else.

Thus, this type of absorption can make it challenging at times to return to life outside their writing. Other authors have frequently described this state of intense focus, some easily entering and maintaining it for extended time periods, others experiencing short spurts of complete concentration. Sue Grafton, for instance, said, "My best time as a writer is when any day, or any moment, when the work's going well and I'm completely absorbed in the task at hand" (as cited in Maran, p. 52). For author Sara Gruen, entering into this state feels "like I've gone through a portal into that world, the fictional world, and I'm recording what's going on rather than creating it" (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 64).

Green, Brock, and Kaufman (2004) write that in this state of absorption one can "lose track of time, fail to observe events going on around them, and feel they are completely immersed in the world of the narrative" (p. 247). While this experience may be unique to narrative transport, the sensation of becoming fully focused on an activity has been noted in myriad arenas. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008) concluded from his research that optimal experiences "usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile" (p. 3). He coined the term "flow" to describe these experiences. Flow occurs when one's "thoughts, intentions, feelings and all the senses are focused on the same goal. Experience is in harmony" (p. 41). For authors then, narrative transport is the means through which they enter into a state of flow. What, then, appeals to these authors about the experience of flow?

**Focus and forgetting oneself.** Most individuals have had the experience, whether

occasional or frequent, of leaving behind everyday concerns and entering into a concentrated, unselfconscious state of mind. People find numerous ways to access this state—meditation, movie watching, exercise, and writing, to name just a few. The human mind is more often overflowing with thoughts, memories, and emotions. Csikszentmihalyi (2008) describes this as "disorder in consciousness." He writes that "pain, fear, rage, anxiety, or jealousy, all these varieties of disorder force attention to be diverted. . . . Psychic energy becomes unwieldy and ineffective" (p. 36). The first element of flow, in contrast, is a state of intense focus on a single task, accompanied by the relinquishment of external and internal distractions. Paolini, for example, described this state when he said, "All of my thoughts throughout the day are directed toward the scene." Likewise, Russo said that while writing "you are living elsewhere for that period of time."

Secondly, in flow one has the capacity to temporarily forget oneself. Csikszentmihalyi (2008) writes that when an activity is engrossing, there is "not enough attention left over to allow a person to consider either the past or future. . . . What slips from the threshold of awareness is the concept of self . . . and being able to forget temporarily who we are seems to be very enjoyable" (pp. 62-64). In her article *Writing in Flow*, Perry (1999) says that, "Many writers seek out the positive feelings unleashed by flow when intense absorption overtakes consciousness of self. Many feel their best work comes out of a flow state" (p. 214). For example, Ursula Le Guin said, "I consider the gift of being absorbed in my work the greatest pleasure and the noblest privilege of my life" (as cited in Perry, 1999, p. 44). Russo too talked about the pleasure of this type of experience when he said that, as an author, one needs to feel strongly enough for your characters,

To get you out of yourself. To disassociate yourself from yourself for the period of time

> that you're spending with this fictional person which is both empathy and I suppose that ability that we all need from time to time to just get out of ourselves, to get over ourselves.

Other authors have spoken of the positive sensation of forgetting oneself in the process of writing. James Frey, for example, said, "The thing I love most about the act of writing is that I disappear. I get lost in trying to make every word the right word, in trying to tell the story" (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 42). Jennifer Eagan (as cited in Maran, 2013) likewise said,

> When I'm writing a first draft I feel as if I've been transported out of myself. . . . I forget who I am and what I come from. I slip into utter absorption mode. I love the sense that I've become so engaged with the other side I've slightly lost my bearings here. (p. 28)

At times, this is also accompanied by the loss of a sense of time, as when Gish Jen (as cited in Maran, 2013) said, "When I'm writing I'm unaware of myself. I'm in my characters, in the story. If the writing is going well when I look at my watch and see that's ten p.m., and the last time I looked it was noon" (p. 84).

This state is apparently not rare for writers. In one study, Paton (2012) found that 68% of the 41 writers she interviewed "mentioned entering into an altered state of consciousness, unconscious processes or the sense of time distortion or loss of control associated with the 'flow' state during the writing process" (p. 65). Paton also found that the writers alternated between this and a more rational, methodical state when planning, preparing, or editing. However, both states can be found during any stage of the writing process. For example, the authors described needing to do meticulous, even dull research at times and, at other times, entering into a joyful, flow-like state while gathering data. Lethem said that he had to "just have background awareness to make my characters live in the world that I wanted them to live in. But I don't thrill to having to do

tons of that kind of drier, more deliberate research." Later, however, he said that for *Fortress of Solitude,*

> I had to do a lot of carpentry . . . to fit my singer into the history of soul music. That entailed reading all the liner notes of all the CDs I already loved and listening to the music endlessly and fantasizing about where can my guy fit between Bill Withers and Marvin Gaye. So that was a pretty delicious kind of research.

Thus, enjoyment and flow can occur at any stage of the writing process.

**Being with or being another.** The authors described entering into flow primarily when their minds were merged with the internal and external worlds of their characters. Green et al. (2004) write that humans have the ability to adopt a "character's thoughts, goals, emotions and behaviors, and such vicarious experience requires the reader or viewers to leave his or her physical, social, and psychological reality behind in favor of the world of the narrative and its inhabitants" (p. 318). Paolini for instance said, "I put myself very strongly in the point of view of whatever character I'm writing about." At times, the authors even spoke about leaving behind their reality so completely that they felt that they had become their characters. Doria Russell said, "I became Verner Shrump and I needed to understand what it was like to be a Nazi." This experience of being a character has been described by numerous authors. Isabelle Allende, for example, said, "When I'm writing, I am a slave. I am on the plantation. I feel the heat, I smell the smells" (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 8). Terry McMillan too said, "I am consumed by the characters I'm writing about. I become them. I lose all sense of my own reality when I'm writing a novel. It's refreshing" (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 141).

The authors also described having a relationship with and strong emotional responses to their characters. Richard Russo said, "I really loved Mrs. Whiting from *Empire Falls* with her

cat. And she's much the sharpest knife in the drawer. . . . So it's not that I approve . . . of her behavior. But I enjoyed her company tremendously." The characters can feel like companions, friends, family or even foes. "In *Dreamers of The Day,*" Doria Russell said, "I got to make friends with Lawrence of Arabia." Later she said, "I loved John Candotti." As the characters develop distinct traits and voices, they often feel quite tangible to the authors. "Even the minor characters will be extremely vocal, right out of the gate," Russo continued, "[Rub's] first words to me were, 'You know what I wisht?'" The central characters are not stick figures or caricatures, but, as Lethem described, people with "reality principles" and unique personalities.

In fact, at times the author experiences the characters as speaking to them, sitting with them, or joining them for a meal. Russo said that if he does not feel he has worked well that day, he will be sitting down at dinner and his wife will say, "'You're not really here are you?' and I'll have to confess 'I'm actually having dinner with Lucy Lynch tonight. I'm sorry I seem to be talking to you.'" Likewise, Taylor et al. (2002) found that "some of the fictional characters were experienced as sometimes leaving the pages of the writers' stories to inhabit the writers' everyday world" (p. 376). Alice Walker (2011), for instance, wrote, "Just as summer was ending, one or more of my characters—Celie, Shug, Albert, Sofia, or Harpo—would come for a visit. We would sit wherever I was, and talk" (p. 356). Doria Russell too said,

> Doc was very clear. He would wake me up. You know there's a fine line between schizophrenia and what I do. . . . You're hearing voices and you're answering and taking them seriously . . . they say things and you're like, where did that line come from?

Along these lines, Russo said, "When this person who doesn't exist, who has never lived, almost dies and you can't control the tears. Something not quite kosher is going on here."

This relationship with characters brings to mind children's imaginary friends. In fact,

Taylor et al. (2002) found that a higher percentage of authors had imaginary companions than found in the average population. Authors and children alike know that their characters or imaginary friends are not real, but simultaneously experience them as being present and tangible (Majors, 2013). Doria Russell even referred to her characters as imaginary friends at one point and Mirvis spoke about her characters as being similar to imaginary companions in a talk she presented. Imaginary companions don't always obey one's demands or act in an expected manner. In a study of children's perceptions of their imaginary companions, an 11-year-old said about her imaginary pony, "The thing is, I don't want a perfect horse . . . and when I'm riding I don't want her to do exactly what I say" (as cited in Majors, 2013, p. 556). Fictional characters likewise don't always do what is expected. Mirvis talked about how her characters start to morph away from the "wax figures" or "stand-ins" she begins with as the story progresses. Sara Gruen said,

> There's a moment in every book when the story and characters are finally there, they come to life, they're in control, they do things they're not supposed to do and become people they weren't meant to be. When I reach that place, it's magic. It's a kind of rapture. (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 62)

Most authors seem to experience at some point this "illusion of independent agency," the sensation of their characters as autonomous individuals (Taylor et al., 2002). In fact, Taylor et al. found that the published writers experienced greater levels of independent agency than those who were unpublished. One might hypothesize that the more vivid the characters feel to the author, the more believable and appealing they are to the reader as well.

This relationship with characters was described by the authors as an aspect of what motivates them to write. For one, it can be a fascinating undertaking to try to get to know the

characters intimately or, as Mirvis put it, to "push past that initial knowing . . . just trying to get deeper, dig deeper into the knowing of a character." In fact, there is an appeal in the challenge of writing a character who feels tangible, but quite different from oneself. Doria Russell, for instance, said, "I started with someone who I didn't understand and I think that was the reason I was able to sustain the intellectual work that goes into writing a novel." Paolini too talked about the challenge of writing characters quite unlike him, such as a 100 year-old elven princess. Furthermore, this relationship generates a sense of responsibility. Russo spoke about characters he hadn't yet written into a novel, "Here's a whole bunch of people if they don't have my complete attention are going to be disappointed and pay the price." Their stories would simply cease to exist if not written. Lethem described several times how a part of what pushes him to write is:

> The almost unbearable feeling that something that's real to you isn't real to anyone else yet and you've got to make it so. That it already is meaningful to you and you want to turn it into its property of persuasion . . . it starts existing enough for you that you have to make it really exist.

The characters and world begin to exist so strongly in the author's imagination that he or she feels a compulsion to make them real for others.

In addition, if the characters feel sufficiently substantial, this generates a sense of joy, guilt, or even remorse at times for pushing their lives in negative or positive directions. Their fate is in the hands of the author. Doria Russell talked about this when she said, "Oh god I did such terrible things to that poor man. But I do give him a daughter!" Mirvis similarly says that she had to make "a cold-blooded decision to say let's push you to the brink and not to keep everyone safe and happy." Furthermore, the authors are at times so joined with their characters that they feel

what their characters feel or have strong emotional reactions to their characters' experiences. Lethem said,

> There's one section where I just write this letter, she writes a letter, and it's to her absent father . . . the letter just busts me up every time I look at it. I'm like wow, I just wrote this thing that's a total faucet. I'm now talking about it, and I'm tearing up talking about it with you.

Russo too described emotional moments, both positive and negative, when joined with his characters:

> There are times when characters, on the one end of the emotional spectrum, just crack me up and I'll just be sitting up in my office just, I wouldn't say laughing uncontrollably, but I'm just so delighted by what they've done or something that they've said that I just gasp. . . . And then there are times that I have brought myself to tears over something.

Doria Russell also talked about shaking after writing a scene when a character's traumatic past was revealed. Thus, the authors often share in the characters' grief, anger, or sorrow along with their joy, laughter, and love.

**Enjoyment Amidst Challenge**

Russo said at one point in our interview, "I knew I had to write the book and I did write the book and I'm proud of it and pleased with it, but it did send me someplace I'd have preferred to avoid." Like Russo, all of the authors spoke of times when the affect that arose while writing was uncomfortable or unpleasant. For instance, they described the devastation at the death of a character, sobbing at the loss of a character's parent, or physically shaking at the realization of a character's trauma history. However, the language they tended to use did not suggest that that they despised these moments, but rather that they were fully absorbed in the intensity of this

affective experience. Lethem, for instance, said, "I have this obsession with re-describing the same basic emotional thing, and it happens to be an emotional thing that generates a lot of innate anxiety, sympathy, power, just sense of human presence. And so I can just embrace that." He went on to say,

> I'm really conscious of, 'Ok, today I'm going to do that, I'm going to go and I'm going to be in the black hole of the thing that can never be healed, and I'm going to make more of my book out of it.' So you know again it's something you can accustom yourself to, but I can still feel my resistance to it or just simply my sorrow attached to it. . . . Yet that also becomes a matter of pride and exhilaration to use so many of my emotional resources with a conscious and adept capacity.

Thus there is a certain power in utilizing one's emotions, whether dark or light, to shape a novel. In fact, the affect triggered by writing seems to be tolerable or even sought out in part because it is in line with the goal of writing—it can signify to the author that things are going well, that they are immersed in the story sufficiently to be deeply affected by it. Along these lines, Czikszentmihalyi (2008) says that in a state of flow "when the information that keeps coming into awareness is congruent with goals, psychic energy flows effortlessly. There is no reason to worry" (p. 39).

Neurologist Alice Flaherty (2005) writes in her book *The Midnight Disease*,

> During my postpartum break I discovered a mystery: I loved my sorrow. . . . It is a world where beauty cannot be separated from pain, and should not be, as when a scalpel is needed to expose the exquisite organs of the belly. A pen can be a scalpel too. I don't write to forget what happened; I write to remember. There are worse things in life than painful desire; one of them is to have no desire. (p. 205)

Authors encounter a wide range of human emotions through their characters' experiences. As Flaherty suggests here, this intense affect may at times be enjoyable for authors because it simply allows them to feel deeply. Indeed, narrative transport studies have found that enjoyment is not only derived from emotions with a clearly positive valence such as satisfaction, humor, and joy, but also from emotions with a negative valence such as sadness and anger (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). We see plainly from the types of movies that are popular that people often are drawn to narratives thick with violence, loss, horror, and fear. Green et al. (2004) write that "the enjoyment of a transportation experience, thus, does not necessarily lie in the valence of the emotions evoked by a narrative, but in the process of temporarily leaving one's reality behind and emerging from the experience somehow different" (p. 315).

Along these lines, the authors' described experiencing distress primarily when there were interruptions in flow, at times accompanied by a fear that they would not be able return to an inspired, focused writing state. Russo, for example, brought up several times that his writing was less free flowing than it used to be:

> As a young writer I always had that sense that we'll fix it in post, this'll be fine. And that attitude is what seems to have abandoned me as I've gotten older. I want to fix it now and sometimes inappropriately soon. . . . [It] just slows the process to a grind.

Furthermore, he worried this was the "new normal. . . . It's really made me wonder if I'm crossing over into some sort of new territory. Everything about the process has become more difficult and I would have to say less enjoyable." Paolini too talked about times in his writing when writing was effortful and slow:

> I was obsessing over ever last comma and word trying to make sure that the end was going to convey what I wanted it to convey because this was the last chance I had at

> doing anything in the series. . . . And there was the deadline, which I didn't have with Eragon. So the combination of all those things made me become much more obsessive with my writing. Both word to word obsessive but also day-to-day in terms of how much time I was spending on the writing. I actually burned out on it a couple of times because I was working so hard.

These difficult moments are the inverse of flow—when the author is arduously and often self-consciously trying to finish or perfect his or her words. Paradoxically, praise and success too can push one into a more self-conscious state. Paolini gave an example:

> Let's say someone praises something in the book that you did without thinking about too much, something you did unconsciously as a writer. And then all of a sudden you're self-conscious about that thing. So when you sit down to write again it can mess with you.

Thus, the darkest moments the authors described were times when they were no longer swept up in the world of their narratives, but were painstakingly trudging along or overthinking how their book would be read and received. Interruptions in flow or writer's block can be especially disturbing for the authors because writing is a passion, livelihood, and an integral aspect of their identity. At times, of course, self-consciousness may be a necessary aspect of the editing or writing process, but it isn't necessarily enjoyable.

**Surmountable challenges.** Writing fiction is far from easy. Besides interruptions in flow and working with difficult emotional material, the authors talked about numerous other challenges along the way and how they have overcome these hurdles. For one, there is an important distinction between intolerable and manageable challenges. The latter may in fact be an important facet of what keeps an author writing. If writing were always a smooth ride, would it be engaging? Hemmingway wrote in a letter to Ivan Kashkin (as cited in Phillips, 1999) that

writing, "is a perpetual challenge and it is more difficult than anything else that I have ever done—so I do it" (p. 15). Similarly, Kathryn Harrison said about writing, "Even when it's just hard, it's always involving" (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 72). Along these lines, Csikszentmihalyi (2008) says that in order to enter flow, the task at hand must be challenging, but surmountable. There must be a balance between skill level and task so that one has some amount of faith in the likelihood of prevailing.

The authors described developing this faith or confidence over time. For example, after finishing a large project, Lethem described at times feeling drained and bereft of ideas. The first time he had this experience, "I was interested in it in some ways, but disorganized or disoriented by it too because I usually had another thing really ready to go." However, the second time, having discovered that it was a temporary state the previous time it occurred, this sensation was "more familiar . . . and I'm savoring it." Likewise, Russo reassured himself regarding the slowed pace of his writing that "whatever this glitch in my process or in my head or in my imagination or wherever the hell it's located, seems to be . . . at the benign end of the kind of spectrums that can paralyze authors, make them non-functional."

In addition, the authors spoke about the process of learning to let go of criticism in a similar manner. For Paolini, it was quite difficult to receive criticism when his first book came out because he felt that everything he had accomplished with *Eragon* "could vanish, could all get taken away." But over time he learned ways to cope with and be less sensitive to negative feedback. Mirvis also said, "You also have to accept not everyone's going to like you, not everyone's going to like your book." In addition, these authors could draw upon their experiences of delight of writing as well as positive external feedback they had received—being published, receiving praise and awards, and having a strong fan base. This, along with the

repeated experience of overcoming impediments to writing, learning to accept the creative process as it unfolded, and simply returning day after day to their desks to write seems to have helped them develop resilience and confidence during more difficult times.

**Naming, Confessing, and Narrative**

The authors also described a certain power in giving language to their emotions, thoughts, observations and experiences. Mirvis, for example, said that writing is “my attempt to name some truth in the world. . . . The pleasure of when you feel like ‘exactly, that’s exactly what it’s like.’ . . . those moments when you feel like you nail it right down the middle.” Similarly, James Frey said, “There’s pure pleasure when you feel like you wrote a sentence that’s perfect for whatever it needs to be” (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 47). At times, this naming is an act of exposure, of voicing their views on topics considered taboo or unacceptable. Mirvis, for example, said, “I don’t think what everyone thinks, and I’m going to say it. You can’t stop me from saying it. It felt scary but I felt like what is the alternative? Sit down and shut up?” She talked frequently about giving voice to discontent and being somewhat wary, at first, of how it would be received. At other times, the author may be utilizing personal material that evokes a sense of shame, discomfort, or pain. Jonathan Franzen, for instance, said in an email conversation that an aspect of his attraction to writing fiction “has a lot to do with my high levels of shame, my need to confess the things I'm ashamed of” (J. Franzen, personal communication, July 9, 2013). What do the authors gain from confessing or expressing these experiences through the creation of a fictional story?

For one, the authors derived meaning from the sense that their writing might give language to something unspoken for the reader as well. Mirvis, for example, said,

I think it’s like sending out something with the hope that if I feel like this, other people

> do too. They'll be the naysayers always, but it's like knowing there's going to be someone or lots of someones who quietly, whether they say it publicly or privately, feel like 'oh that names the feeling.'

Doria Russell too said, "It's been 20 years since I wrote [*The Sparrow*] and I just got an email again today from somebody who has found it very meaningful all these years later."

Furthermore, the act of creating a work of fiction out of their experiences generates a sense of purpose. Lethem, for instance, described having had the sense upon beginning a book that this novel was a project "that only I can do, and it needs me so much." Paolini said that he didn't start writing for praise or fame but because he had a story he wanted to tell. "I wanted something for myself," he said, "something that I could point to and say, 'hey I did this!'" Along these lines, Mary Karr said, "I have a kind of primitive need to leave a mark on the world" (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 107). Lethem described a similar compulsion when he mentioned Thomas Berger's response to the question, "why do you write?" Berger had replied, "Because it isn't there." Lethem commented,

> [It was] a play on the old 'Why do you climb mountains? Because it's there.' I'm just trying to add something to the world to look at. It's like the instinct to make an artifact. . . . In a very pure sense it's an additive gesture. No one ever wrote a story like this before. I just feel I *am* a witness to all sorts of ways of feelings and living, moments that past, situations, counter cultures, arrangements in the human story that are worth getting right. . . . Not writing injustices or correcting records but just adding to the descriptive heap of human testimony.

Neil Gaiman (2004) likewise said, "The world always seems brighter when you've just made something that wasn't there before." Much of the time authors are not consciously writing to

effect change, but to simply add something to the world and to create a tangible expression of their unique perspective.

This "additive gesture" however is not a simple act of expression, but one in which they transform their experiences into a work of art. At one point in our interview, Mirvis said about a troubling event in her family that she had written about, "If life looks like the way it does, imperfect, at least you can make something artistic out of it. . . . It felt better when it happened if I could put it into fiction." Along these lines, Jonathan Franzen wrote,

> Fiction gives me the opportunity to give more palatable form to the shameful stuff—to make it meaningful within a well-bounded piece of art, to make it funny, to experience the relief of confession without having to factually confess—and to present it as a gift to the reader who may have his or her own related shames. (J. Franzen, personal communication, July 9, 2013)

Writing can be a means, then, to make something contained and aesthetically pleasing out of the imperfection or disorder of life. The narrative arch of the story has the potential to create a sense of order and meaning out of one's experiences. Armistead Maupin said, "I write to explain myself to myself. It's a way of processing my disasters, sorting out the messiness of life to lend symmetry and meaning to it" (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 130). A novel does not usually lead to concrete messages or conclusions, but rather to a narrative that the mind can grasp and a felt sense of meaning. What, then, is appealing to the human sentiment about forming a narrative? Michael White, the founder of narrative therapy writes,

> The need for narrative, the need to place events in stories, shapes much of our writing and speech. Linking facts into cause-and-effect chains makes them easier for our brains to absorb, making them more memorable for readers and even for the writer. Creating

> narrative links gives a sense that there are causal chains. (White, 2007, p. 218)

Stories are easier to absorb, process, and make meaning out of than the unruliness of everyday experience. Authors do indeed speak about their writing as generating a deepened sense of meaning and understanding of various relationships, events, and topics through their writing. For instance, Kathryn Harrison said, "I write, also, because it's the apparatus I have for explaining the world around me" (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 72-73). She continues, "I saw who we were, my mother, my father, myself, and I thought, I can just write about what happened. I can try to reveal what happened in ways that make it an understandable story" (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 78). In a meta-analysis on the benefits of writing, Pennebaker and Chung (2011) theorize,

> Once an experience is translated into language . . . it can be processed in a conceptual manner. In language format, the individual can assign meaning, coherence, and structure. This would allow for the event to be assimilated and ultimately resolved and/or forgotten, thereby alleviating the maladaptive effects of incomplete emotional processing. (p. 17)

Indeed, Smyth, True, and Souto (2001) found that the benefits of writing about traumatic events are greater when the participant generates a coherent story rather than expressing it in a "fragmented format" or list.

Writing is also at times a means to examine and make sense of a relationship or situation that hasn't been fully resolved or comprehended. Russo, for instance said that one motivation for his writing was that "there were certain things about my own life and my relationship to my family and that place that I didn't understand." Mirvis too said about her first piece of fiction,

> It was like the way of understanding what had happened. The only way I could make sense of it was on the page and there was a way in which it served as a consolation. . . . I could put it into fiction somehow or write about it . . . to reduce a lot of uncertainty about

> what had happened and . . . reduce it to some form of truth.

Thus, writing can help one grasp why and how things came to be. Along these lines, Flaherty (2005) writes,

> Using writing to give cognitive meaning to events may parallel an equally deep human need, the need to give emotional meaning to an existence that is opaque. The universal desire to feel that life has some purpose is perhaps stronger in writers, whose occupation instills in them a mania for meaning—a desire, as Paul Velery put it, 'to erect a minor monument of language on the menacing shore of the ocean of gibberish.' (p. 220)

This meaning acquired through writing was conveyed by the authors as the sense that their experiences were not theirs alone, but part of a larger human story. For instance, in conducting research for *Fortress of Solitude*, Lethem learned that the term "yoke," which was a form of bullying he frequently experienced as a child, had deeper historical origins than he had realized. He said,

> It's when I placed it in my art and when I placed it in the world, even by identifying things like figuring out . . . that yoke was much older slang than I think anyone who was using in the '70s knew. I took it as part of black culture. Well actually it's something gangsters were saying in the roaring '20s, the prohibition era—throw a yoke on him. So I was like this is much deeper than the participants grasped.

He found that his experiences were linked with a larger, historically reenacted drama. In summary, through fiction writing an author has the ability to work with and shape their personal stories and observations into a meaningful, coherent, deeply human work of art. Along these lines, Jonathan Franzen wrote,

> I think both I and other people are essentially constructed narratives. . . . It seems to me

likely that the enduring appeal of fictional narrative is that fiction writers are doing openly, boldly, entertainingly, what we're all constantly doing anyway with our memories: making better stories. (J. Franzen, personal communication, July 9, 2013)

## Symbolic Play and Fiction Writing

**Preparation and practice.** My three-year-old was a fireman yesterday, a father today. Through pretend play, a child tries out various roles, ways of being, and scenarios. As a father, he talked quietly and held his "baby." When he became a fireman he ran quickly to the burning building and yelled, "Spray, spray!" As adults, when do we have the opportunity to experiment with different facets of our personalities or pretend to be different kinds of people altogether? How can we practice or test out our responses to situations that haven't yet arisen in our own lives? The primary avenue we have for this is our imagination. In his essay *Creative Writers and Daydreaming,* Sigmund Freud (1908/1995), wrote, "A piece of creative writing, like the day-dream, is a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood" (p. 152). According to Freud, since imaginary play is no longer acceptable in adulthood, the adult turns to fantasy and daydreaming instead. These daydreams are fodder for the authors' novels. Freud hypothesizes that "the creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously—that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion—while separating it sharply from reality" (p. 144). Children and adults alike know that their worlds of play and fantasy are not real and yet imbue them with meaning and substantiality.

Piaget (1962) asks, "Why imitate the church steeple, lie motionless to mime a [dead] duck, make one's doll drink imaginary soup, scolding or encouraging it the while?" (p. 155). In other words, why engage in imaginary play? One theory of play is that it is a means for mastering emotions, practicing responses, and trying out new skills in a safe environment in

order to prepare for future events. Brian Boyd (2010), an evolutionary psychologist, argues along these lines that, "the more often and the more exuberantly animals play, the more they hone skills, widen repertoires, and sharpen sensitivities. Play therefore has evolved to be highly Self-rewarding" (p. 92). Boyd wasn't the first to put forth this theory. Amongst others, one of the early psychological theorists on play, Karl Groos (as cited in Singer, 1973), had a similar hypothesis that "play emerges out of natural selection as a form of necessary practice on the part of the child or immature organism for behaviors that are essential to later survival" (p. 9). Pretend play has likewise been thought of as a means to confront possible life scenarios and to practice a variety of responses. In this type of play, material objects, the self, and others are instilled with new meaning and are both themselves and something else. Children act out scenarios, Piaget (1962) suggests, because "the child's interior thought is not as yet sufficiently precise and mobile, his logico-verbal thought is still too vague, while the symbol concretizes and animates everything" (p. 155). Unlike the child, however, the adult does have the capacity for conceptual thought. Instead of acting out different responses to various situations through play, this exploration can take place in the mind. Storytelling and fiction are offshoots of this ability to explore possibilities through the imagination.

Boyd (2010) makes the argument that, as with play, the ability to create and enjoy fiction is adaptive because it hones our cognitive skills, specifically our ability to navigate social scenarios. He writes that,

> Minds generate future: they guide action by trying to predict what will follow. In the high volatility, variability, and flexible responsiveness of human social interaction, any improvement in interpreting situations and testing possible scenarios, actions, or reactions, using not only personal or reported experience but also the thought

> experiments of pretend play and fiction, offers a telling advantage. (p. 195)

Boyd reasons, then, that fiction allows one to experience various social scenarios vicariously and that this aids in one's ability to navigate the social world. He writes,

> Fiction's appeal to our appetite for rich patterns of social information engages our attention from infant pretend play to adulthood. Because it entices us again and again to immerse ourselves in story, it helps us over time to rehearse and refine our apprehension of events. . . . Fiction also increases the range of our vicarious experience and behavioral options. Like play, it allows us to learn possible opportunities and risks, and the strategies and emotional resources needed to cope with inevitable setbacks, without subjecting ourselves to actual risk. (pp. 193-194)

Thus Boyd theorizes that, like play, fiction immerses us in an imaginary world where we can experience various situations without risk. As we have seen previously, the author often becomes absorbed in the world of the characters so much so that he or she feels and experiences what the characters experience. Boyd proposes that this immersion—whether through writing, reading, or viewing—improves a person's "capacity to interpret events" and to learn "opportunities and risks." A number of times the authors I interviewed did describe their writing as a means for playing with and preparing for possible future scenarios. For example, Richard Russo said in our interview, "*Straight Man* I think was a book about a man's relationship to his daughters after his daughters were grown, despite the fact that my daughters at the time were still little girls. But I was wondering, 'My God, what's it going to be like when they're grown?'" Russo's characters are often 10 years older than himself, encountering situations he won't face for a decade. When speaking about *The Risk Pool* (1988), he said, "My father was very ill when I wrote that book . . . and that was an exercise among other things of me preparing for his death. Getting to play both

parts for a while in preparation for the day when you'll have to forever." When I asked him whether he felt this actually did help him prepare for the future, he responded, "Yeah, I think that was certainly true of *Straight Man*, especially Hank's relationship with his daughter. I think it was a way of me preparing myself to be a different kind of father to a 19 or 20-year-old daughter. I think it kind of helped me get there."

Mirvis also described the novel as a "test case." Like imaginary play, one has the ability to envision the future and play out different choices and responses. Mirvis placed her characters in a variety of challenging relationships and explored how each responded. At first she did not make the connection with her own marital struggles. Gradually, however, the writing helped her gain clarity on how she felt and what choices to make about her own marriage. Thus, this type of play through writing can have a real impact on one's decisions and actions.

**Playing with different ways of being.** As stated by Freud, adults do not give up play but instead turn to fantasy. Like the child, we envision events that have not yet occurred and put ourselves in others' shoes. Authors of fiction use this mechanism to imagine what it would be like to be another person in circumstances similar to or at times vastly different from than their own. Keith Oatley (2011) writes in his book *Such Stuff as Dreams*,

> In the branch of imagination called fiction, we can enter in imagination many more situations than a lifetime could contain. In doing so we undertake mental enactments. We become for a while people who we are not, and have feelings for people we would not otherwise know. (p. 30)

We saw this when the authors described feeling as though they became their characters or developed a relationship with them. Oatley continues,

> An important way of thinking about fiction is that it depicts roles—people as lovers,

> parents, helpers, criminals—and these roles can be either attractive or not. Such roles enable us to imagine ourselves into them, to feel sympathy for them, and see what it is like to be a certain kind of person. (p. 172)

Again, like the child at play, the author has the opportunity to try on different identities, responses, and perspectives. While authors are not physically acting out these roles the way children do, at times they feel as though they too have become another or are deeply emotionally affected by their characters. Along these lines, Wallace Stegner (as cited in Atwood et al., 2014) wrote of authors, “We’re all practiced shape-shifters and ventriloquists; we can assume shapes and speak in voices not our own” (p. 146).

This brings up the question of whether writing indeed activates similar parts of the brain as would be activated if the author actually carried out the characters’ actions and felt what the characters felt. Unfortunately, there have been few studies that examine the brain while authors are engaged in writing, and those that have been conducted are limited in scope (e.g., Shah et al., 2013). However, there are numerous studies on other forms of narrative transport, specifically on the neurology of reading. One such study found that, “when readers were engaged in a story . . . at the points in which the story said a protagonist undertook an action, activation of the brain occurred in the part which the reader himself or herself would use to undertake the action” (Speer, Zacks, & Reynolds, 2007 as cited in Oatley, 2011, p. 20). While further study is needed, it could be surmised from such research that when one is transported by story through whatever means, one does at times live through the characters’ experiences as if, to some degree, they were their own.

**Exploring and questioning.** Melanie Green (2005) theorizes that this ability to be “transported” by fiction and to enter into the lives of characters creates the opportunity for

identity play. She writes,

> Transportation can open the doors to exploring and experimenting with other possible selves . . . those that individuals might become, wish to become, or fear becoming. . . . Narrative worlds have the unique benefit of providing simulations of alternative personalities, realities, and actions without any real cost to the individual. (p. 58)

Being swept up in the reality of another allows one to safely experiment with what it might feel like to be someone else. The authors described several ways in which this type of exploration was beneficial. For one, it helped them discover and flesh out their own identity and perspective. At times, this happened without the authors' conscious effort and at other times the authors intentionally set out to investigate a topic or question. Paolini, for example, said, "Usually I'm consciously trying to examine X, Y, Z . . . you decide that 'hey I would like these characters to think about this issue.'" Similarly, Mirvis said, "The book is a safe place to ask those questions." Numerous other authors have described their writing as a way to ask questions and explore topics. For example, Jane Smiley stated that, "I write to investigate things I'm curious about" (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 206) and to again quote Margaret Atwood (1990), "I don't think I solve problems in my poetry; I think I uncover the problems. Then the novel seems a process of working them out" (para. 31).

Writing also can be a means to play with philosophical, spiritual, or intellectual aspects of one's identity. Doria Russell and Mirvis both described using their novels to question their religious upbringing and decipher their own practices and beliefs. Through their characters' unique viewpoints on religion, they were able to come to better understand what they themselves felt about religion. Mirvis, for instance, described her first two books as helping her work

through her relationship to the Orthodox Judaism with which she grew up. She said that it was a way of "wrestling with could I fit into this world and what do I really think of this world?" Similarly, Doria Russell talked about how she responded to different characters' religious perspectives in her book, *The Sparrow*:

> Felipe Reyes says, 'Not even a sparrow can fall without your father knowing it.' The sparrow still falls. Doesn't do the sparrow a whole hell of a lot of good to know that God's eye is on the sparrow. . . . Well, I felt that that was something that I didn't buy, which is one of the reasons I did not go back to Christianity. [But when] I had to write the homily for Mark Robichaux to say at the funeral . . . I found that when I pushed my characters into a wall like that, I found that as an individual and as a writer what I wanted to do was give them Jewish perspective on what just happened.

The characters' responses to hardship allowed Doria Russell to gain a sense of which belief systems resonated for her personally and which did not. Thus, when a character's views are distinct from the author's perspective, this can help highlight the author's own beliefs and opinions. Paolini too emphasized that, "the conclusions that the characters arrive at are not necessarily mine," and Mirvis said,

> I guess I feel like I know the deeper answer to the question is inside me somewhere, that I know it in some ways, I just have to find it. I think I always felt frustration . . . the answers to the questions I had were not going to come from anywhere else . . . no one can do this for me.

Hence, writing fiction can be an active and thorough approach to exploring one's questions, beliefs, and identity by experimenting with different ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world. At times, authors describe coming to concrete conclusions through such

exploration such as when Jodi Picoult said, "I write because it's a way of puzzling out answers to situations in the world that I don't understand. . . . It forces me to sort through the various points of view on a given issue or situation and ultimately come to a conclusion" (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 196). But more often the authors pointed to the fact that the truth that a novel illuminates is far from simple. Mirvis talked about how her book *The Outside World* was a way to ask, "'What if you felt this way, and what if you felt that way?' . . . Fiction doesn't always offer a resolution. . . . I don't think fiction should give you the answer but more like a wrestling." Several of the authors articulated this same perspective, namely that the result of this type of exploration is not a clear-cut resolution but rather a broadened sense of the complexity of the issue at hand. Lethem, for example, said, "There was something that had gone on between another boy and me . . . knowing in a way that nothing less than that whole novel could say." Doria Russell drew a parallel between writing and anthropology, "you start with a very narrow understanding, and you would need to have an idea of what the rest of the world is like. You need to expand that from other points of view." Similarly, Lethem said that in writing you are,

> Comparing different stories and by generating multiples, discovering your freedom to navigate between them. Our experience is made out of multiple subjectivities. It's why the novel is such an irreplaceable vehicle to capture what it feels like to deal with being alive. . . . [It] insists that you suspend understanding until you've surrounded it with multiple subjectivities.

Each of us can simultaneously hold multiple perspectives or "subjectivities" and the novel asks us to actively do so. Richard Schwartz, the founder of Internal Family Systems Therapy, describes how "we all contain many different beings" (Schwartz, 1995, p. 9). These internal entities are seen as "distinct personalities, each with a full range of emotions and desires,

and of different ages, temperaments, talents and even genders" (p. 13). Schwartz is not the first theorist to articulate the view that we are not one self, but contain within us many ways of being, thinking, and feeling. Writing allows an author to connect with these different ways of being by externalizing these aspects of their personalities as characters and developing a relationship with them.

Alice Flaherty (2005) writes,

> Life stories, often touted as the basis for our sense of self, can also lock us into a self that is too rigid. Sometimes the goal of psychotherapy is not to help people make sense of their lives, but to help them make less sense of them—to break a few links in the narrative chain so that behavior can be more unpredictable and creative. (p. 219)

Playing with multiple ways of being through one's characters seems to aid in this temporary loosening of self, to be able to expand and explore the boundaries of one's beliefs, thoughts, and feelings. This is in-line with "self-expansion theory" which posits that people seek out and maintain relationships in part to incorporate the resources, perspectives, and identities of others (Aron & Aron, 2001, p. 478). Shedlosky-Shoemaker, Costabile, and Arkin (2014) propose that one motivation for seeking out narrative transport experiences is the pursuit of this self-expansion. They write, "Traveling to new places—whether real or not—exposes people to new perspectives, experiences, and knowledge" (p. 559). This is similar to Paolini's statement that fantasy allows you to "see and experience and go places that would otherwise be impossible." Furthermore, Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al.'s research suggests that one's relationship with a fictional character,

> can provide a safe haven for self-expansion: One can vicariously take part in new experiences without risks, such as social rejection or physical harm. Moreover, these

> interactions provide an opportunity to be exposed to people, albeit fictional, who may possess characteristics and experiences that social others in one's actual physical world might not possess. . . . [This] can create opportunities for growth in which experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of fictional characters prompt readers' own development. (p. 573)

They posit here that one can grow through the exploration of novel places and internal worlds that a person might not otherwise have the opportunity to explore. Several researchers have been interested in the question of whether people do indeed show marked changes or benefits from such exploration. For example, in one study by Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, and Peterson (2009), participants were assigned to read a short story by Chekov about a love affair or a simple account of the story's events. They completed an emotion checklist and a measure of self-perception before and after reading their assigned piece. Those who read the short story showed small but measurable changes on both scales while those who read the more "dry" version did not. The researchers conclude,

> A relationship of an individual psyche to a work of art is a highly complex process that cannot be easily brought into laboratory. . . . This study shows that the potential for change is there, given that human psyche appears to respond to the artistic form through subtle shifts in the vision of itself. (p. 28)

Oatley (2011) elaborates on this, hypothesizing that participants in the first group,

> Entered mentally into these peoples' lives and thoughts . . . they started to compare their own lives and decisions with those of the characters. . . . People were taken out of themselves, out of their usual ways of being and thinking. The art of the story acted as something that was beyond themselves (transcendent), and this helped to loosen up the

> habitual structures of selfhood. (p. 162)

While further research is needed, these studies do suggest that the act of leaving behind one's world and entering into another's for a time can have a measurable impact.

Several researchers have also written how this self-transcendence through narrative transport can provide a welcome, temporary release from the confines of the self. Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, and Ewoldsen (2014) propose that the maintenance and construction of the self is cognitively and behaviorally demanding and even exhausting at times. They write that "our identities, self-concept, and image require continual effort to develop, maintain, defend, and enhance. This, like any ongoing effort, can be tiresome, even fatiguing, and can therefore motivate activity that provides occasional release from this effort" (p. 441). Furthermore, they propose that the, "social self may be tarnished or it may be gilded, but it remains something of a cage" (p. 442). Here they argue that the desire to escape the constraints of self-hood is a universal phenomenon and that, while there are multiple means for doing so, stories provide an easily accessible release from this "cage." They conclude that,

> When we become transported into a narrative, when we become emotionally and imaginatively identified with a character or characters, we are momentarily relieved of the task of maintenance of our personal and social identity. We are no longer confined to the roles, unrealized potentials, or limitations of that identity. We have temporarily expanded the boundaries of our personal and social self. (p. 444)

This is strikingly similar to the authors' description of flow. Again, Perry (1999) writes that "many writers seek out the positive feelings unleashed by flow when intense absorption overtakes consciousness of self" (p. 214). Russo articulated this phenomenon when he said that as an author you need to feel strongly enough for the characters "to disassociate yourself from

yourself . . . we all need from time to time to just get out of ourselves, to get over ourselves." Fiction thus can provide a temporary release from the exhausting task of self-maintenance and self-concern that may dominate our cognitive, emotional, and social worlds.

Is this act of being transported then a form of escape? The term "escape" often implies a need to get away from unpleasant circumstances. Slater et al. (2014) chose the term "expansion" over "escape" in their research for one, "to avoid confusion with the notion of escapism, which has a connotation of avoidance or defeat in actual social experience we wish to avoid." (p. 444). Along these lines, the authors I spoke with didn't describe deriving pleasure from writing because they were evading negative emotions or aspects of their lives. On the contrary, as discussed, they often delved into painful places and events through their writing. Doria Russell was adamant that writing for her isn't "escape" but "enrichment." For example, regarding the research required to write many of her novels, she said, "I love that aspect of it. It's continuing education for me." Paolini too said that writing "helps give you a broader base of knowledge beyond that because you're always learning new things, researching things." But are learning or enrichment and escape mutually exclusive? Other authors have spoken about their writing as a form of escape, but do not necessarily see this as negative. J.R.R. Tolkien (1939), for example, said,

> I have claimed that escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which 'escape' is now so often used. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? (p. 10)

Thus, if the everyday reality that an author is leaving behind feels decidedly constricting or

oppressive, writing may act as an escape. However, the interviews suggest that the way the authors perceive both their daily lives and the world of their novels is usually not so black and white. As we have seen, the reasons for writing are nuanced, complex, and vary from author to author and even one day of writing to the next.

**Understanding others.** The authors also described how this exploration of different perspectives helps expand their empathic capacity and understanding of others. Paolini, for instance, said that an aspect of the writing process that was transformative for him was "learning to write from the point of view of characters who were very different from who I was at the time. . . . I think writing done properly helps give you a greater appreciation for the way other people view the world." Doria Russell too talked about trying to understand the mindset of people who live in times and circumstances quite different from her own, as when she said, "I became Verner Shrump, and I needed to understand what it was like to be a Nazi doctor." Several of the authors spoke about how they used this practice of extending their empathetic capacity through writing to examine a personal relationship. Again, there was an aspect of a relationship that was unresolved or not fully understood that their novels helped them delve into. Russo, for instance, said, "I wrote [the memoir] for the same reason that I write my novels . . . because there were certain things about my own life and my relationship to my family and that place that I didn't understand." Later he talked about how a period of his writing was,

> A result of the fact that my parents had split up when I was young and my father was the greater mystery in my life—why did he leave? . . .When somebody like that who's that central to your life is just gone 99% of the time, you spend a lot of time in longing and yearning and in trying to solve that mystery of absence.

Thus, several of his novels grappled with this unresolved mystery. Doria Russell too talked about

how several of her novels dealt with her fraught relationship with her mother, trying to grasp the reasons for her mother's harsh judgments. Doria Russell said that her book, *Dreamers of the Day* (2008) "was definitely me working some stuff out." She continued,

> Agnes, the 40 year-old school teacher, she's me as I would have been if I had been raised by my grandmother. . . . It was, okay, let's put me in my mother's situation. . . . Agnes has my intellectual curiosity, and my mother did not. It took me a long, long time to understand that unless you live in Lake Wobegon not everybody is above average, and my mother was just not a great intellect. And I think she was intimidated as well as being confused by me.
>
> Interviewer: Did the writing help you come to that?
>
> Doria Russell: Yeah.

By placing herself in her mother's situation through the character Agnes, she understood that her mother saw things in black and white and was intellectually limited. Her mother couldn't comprehend and was even intimidated by Doria Russell's more nuanced view of the world. At one point in our interview Doria Russell said,

> Everybody is real and human. They're all doing what they think is the best they can. I've never met anybody who gets up, first thing in the morning and looks into the mirror and says 'I'm really gonna fuck up today. By God, I'm gonna screw my life up and I'm gonna make life a living hell for everyone else.' Nobody does this! People get up and they intend to do things right.

Richard Russo described a similar perspective, "An artist friend of mine said to me once that most people, if you grant them one or two assumptions, most of what they do in their lives logically proceeds from those." People do what they do for a reason. It is the authors' task to

discover or formulate this reason and by doing so, to come to understand, empathize with, and bring the characters to life through writing. The added benefit is that this act at times also garners greater understanding of the author's own relationships.

Do fiction authors then have a greater capacity for empathy and thus to imagine characters who feel unique and substantial? Interestingly, Taylor at al. (2002) did find that writers scored higher than the average population on all four measures of the Davis' Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983), which measures empathetic tendencies. It is not clear, however, whether this is a natural capacity possessed by authors and part of what draws them towards writing or whether they develop this ability through writing. Most likely it is a combination of the two—an implicit empathetic capacity that is then strengthened through writing.

While this specific question has not been studied, Mar, Oatley, and Peterson (2009) explored whether reading fiction leads to an increase in empathy and social perceptiveness. He and his colleagues used the "Mind-in-the-Eyes Test" in which participants viewed photographs of eyes and matched them with one of four mental states. The researchers found that participants who read more fiction tended to fare better on this test. Furthermore, they ruled out the possibility that the avid readers already possessed a greater interest in the social world and perceptiveness in social encounters. This study suggests that fiction reading can indeed lead to a measureable increase in social perception.

In another study by Ramond Mar (2007, as cited in Oatley, 2011), participants read either a fiction story or a nonfiction piece from the *New Yorker*. Those who read the fiction piece fared better on a test of social reasoning afterwards, though not on a test of analytical reasoning. Oatley (2011) explained this outcome as a result of priming. "Reading a fiction piece," he writes,

"puts people in a frame of mind of thinking about the social world" (p. 160). He proposed that the results of these two tests may be due to the fact that "readers of fiction tend to become more expert at making models of others and themselves, and at navigating the social world" (p. 160). While these studies are limited in scope and focus on readers rather than writers, they suggest that the effect of coming to a deeper understanding of others through writing is real and in part a product of being frequently transported into others' lives and minds through story. As Russo stated, writing fiction can act as "a study in empathy."

**Being a Writer**

It is important to return to a simple point—just as a child plays because it is pleasurable, not consciously to gain a sense of mastery or to try out different roles, the author does not write to intentionally attain the benefits described above. Lethem, for instance, said, "I certainly never set out for anything to be therapeutic and I suspect the result would be god awful had I done so." The motivations for writing are not typically what consciously compel authors in the moment to sit down at their computers to fashion a story.

Furthermore, authors often convey a sense of mystery about their motives. Russo said, "You continue to go back to something that's kind of . . . not fun and it's not what you intended and in fact you never signed a contract, and you can just quit or you can try to enforce your will upon the story, and why? What is the motive?" Indeed authors often describe feeling that they simply have to write, that it is part of who they are, as when Lethem said, "When I hear remarks by writers about how they just somehow felt destined to do the thing, I think yeah, that's pretty much how I feel." Likewise, Gish Jen said, "Writing is part and parcel of how I am in the world. Eating, sleeping, writing: they go together. I don't think about why I'm writing any more than I think about why I'm breathing" (as cited in Maran, 2013, p. 84). Examples abound. Rick Moody

(as cited in Maran, 2013) said, “I write just as I breathe and eat. Every day. Habitually” (p. 154). Sue Orlean (as cited in Maran, 2013) said, “Writing is all I’ve ever done. I don’t think of it as a profession. It’s just who I am” (p. 174). Writing is often more than a career. It can become an integral aspect of who one is and how one interacts with the world.

**Is Writing Fiction Therapeutic?**

This study suggests that one need not directly express or explore the particular details of one’s experiences, memories, and relationships to work effectively with this material. Indeed, play therapy, art therapy, body-based therapies, dream analysis, and other therapeutic modalities are based on the premise that there are valuable alternatives to talking explicitly about psychological and affective material. While a comprehensive analysis of why this is so is beyond the scope of this study, these authors’ accounts suggest one explanation. Directly discussing unresolved, painful, or challenging topics can give rise to overwhelming affect and/or defensiveness. The distance created by exploring one’s experiences through fictional characters and stories can be less triggering and allow the author to play with this material in a freer manner. Mirvis, for instance, talked about, “being able to ask questions in writing that I wasn’t quite ready to ask in life.” Likewise, Jonathan Franzen, said of his relationship with characters:

> The attraction of creating these virtual relationships? For me it has a lot to do with my high levels of shame, my need to confess the things I'm ashamed of, and my strong resistance to doing it. Fiction gives me the opportunity to give more palatable form to the shameful stuff. (J. Franzen, personal communication, July 9, 2013)

From a slightly safer distance, fiction authors can confess, express, and explore topics that are particularly challenging for them. They can project onto their characters their own deepest

questions, fears, and shames and, through the character's experiences, create new stories about self and other, about how and why things are as they are.

Then does the act of exploring personal material—relationships, emotions, thoughts and experiences—through fiction writing lead to some sense of resolution or healing? The authors varied somewhat in their answers to this question. As previously discussed, at times they experienced the characters' actions as though they too were enacting these deeds. Doria Russell, for example, said of one of her characters, Agnes:

> She learns how to charleston on the ship and somebody offers her a cigarette and she thinks why not? . . . And her mother is in her head saying, 'I just knew it! The minute I'm gone, you fall to this level,' and Agnes in her head just says, 'Oh momma! Shut up!' She gives it to her finally. Finally. Finally gets her own back! . . . Agnes finally manages to break free. And I figured okay now that I have told momma off . . . what's next?

Doria Russell felt she had told off her own mother and, as a result, experienced a sense of breaking free herself. In fact, after writing this,

> I really thought that might be the last novel I wrote. Because I had read so many times that you had to have some type of conflict in your life and I thought there is a mom issue, it's often hidden under different genders and different relationships and stuff like that but there's usually somebody that I can identify in a book as yeah, that's mom.

Her mother does still show up in her writing, but Doria Russell said that she had come "to some resolution."

Lethem's response to the question of whether writing has been healing was less direct,

> It's so hard to separate over time from just ways that life has changed my relationship to these same sensations. . . . I will say that there's no one way in which any one thing I've

> written has been therapeutic . . . but in a sustained, holistic way, having been a writer on the mission to pull out of myself so many different things over such a long period . . . it's a sensation of having been healing in certain ways. But also as long time participants in therapy tend to understand, healing so much consists of not sealing up wounds but becoming familiar with them, just abiding and forgiving the presence of conflict, confusion, reaction, etc . . . not somehow erasing or sealing off.

For Lethem then, writing pushes him to access so many aspects of his experience that it has helped him to "abide, forgive" and sit with these experiences. However, he cautions against trying to make a one-to-one connection with certain novels having specific therapeutic value.

Similarly, when I asked Russo whether revisiting his childhood memories through his writing has allowed him to stop returning or to move on, he said,

> No, it doesn't feel like for me there will ever be an end to that. . . . I'm thinking about William Styron [who] always imagined himself as the writer of big books about important themes . . . But his book called *A Tide Water Morning* . . . he just returned to the world that he knew without having to think about it. . . . He kind of spent his entire life running away from those people and that life . . . it must have given him great solace and satisfaction to return to the place that I think he'd been running away from all those years and to write meaningfully and wonderfully, beautifully about it.

He spoke about Dickens similarly,

> When his father was notoriously unreliable and always in debt, his father . . . made him feel like an orphan in such a profound way that he was always looking for the orphan in everyone. . . . He could buy ever larger houses in London and he could become . . . the toast of the civilized world. But there was always in him that boy who was just a few feet

> from the Thames if you could look out through those inky windows of that factory and see that filthy river flowing by and thinking, 'I've been left here by my parents doing this awful work?' That would keep you going back over an artistic lifetime.

Thus, Russo and Lethem both felt that returning to one's past through writing does not simply allow one to move on, but instead can give one a sense of "solace" and "forgiveness." Furthermore, the authors spoke of a certain power in being able to claim and use these past experiences to construct art, as when Lethem said about being yoked, "I was like, oh wait a minute, I can turn this into my badge, and my fame, and my story."

Through writing, the authors are often accessing, utilizing, and thus being periodically exposed to memories and emotion-laden material. The authors' descriptions suggest that this act has led to a sense of acceptance and decreased sensitivity to such experiences. As we have explored, there are numerous, intricate mechanisms at play that likely contribute to this effect: the increased comprehension of one's experiences and relationships through the creation of a coherent narrative, the satisfaction engendered from turning one's experiences into art, and the sense of not being alone in one's experiences. In the words of Pennebaker and Chung (2011), "If you are expecting a clean and simple explanation for the effectiveness of writing, we have some very bad news: there is no single reason that explains it" (p. 426). Part of the appeal of literature is that it has the potential to mirror life in its nuance and complexity. So too with writing—it can have a real, felt impact on the author. There are myriad avenues and explanations for how and why it does so, all simultaneously at play.

# Conclusion

## Summary

This study examined five authors' experiences writing and used their descriptions to discuss the motivations for and impact of writing fiction. The goal was to generate a rich interpretative account that would allow readers to draw from different elements of the authors' experiences. I tried to stay as close and true to their words as possible while drawing upon additional literature. While the small number of participants allowed for an in-depth account and analysis of their experiences, there were inevitably certain viewpoints not represented.

The first thing that stands out from the interviews is the authors' pure love of writing and story. Even when they encounter challenges—for example, when the writing engenders difficult emotions—all of them talked about the desire and need to continue to write. This pull has myriad sources. For one, writing can produce a state of mind that can be immensely pleasurable, namely a state of flow. The creative task of writing often demands complete focus, so much so that at times the author loses a sense of time and self. The vehicle by which they enter flow is their ability to be transported into their characters' lives and stories. In fact, the authors described the sensation of having a real relationship with or even becoming their characters at times.

Being transported into other lives, times, and cultures can be incredibly fulfilling and even transformative. Writing fiction can provide a compelling means to leave behind everyday concerns from time to time. Furthermore, like the imaginary play of childhood, the task of taking on assorted roles and identities allows for the exploration of different ways of being in the world. The author can vicariously experience what the characters experience. The author has the opportunity to practice and prepare for potential future events and relational situations. While they are usually not setting out to consciously do so, authors can play with different responses to

these scenarios and, through this, explore their own identities, emotional landscapes, questions and beliefs. At times, this even guides the author towards certain decisions and paths.

The task of trying to deeply grasp and convey a character's perspective is also an act of empathy. The authors spoke about how this has the potential to expand their general empathetic capacity and to understand more deeply their own relationships. In addition, when the authors are psychologically and emotionally aligned with their characters, at times they feel as though they are performing the character's acts, and this can lead to a sense of relief and release.

Though the characters and stories are not direct reflections of their lives, the authors are inevitably utilizing personal material in their writing in a transfigured and convoluted form. The authors spoke about how writing fiction provides an opportunity to claim, name, and create art out of their experiences. It can be a means to make something contained and aesthetically pleasing out of the disorder of life. At times there is a sense of satisfaction gained from giving language to the human experience, one that the reader may share. In addition, writing can provide the author with a project and a sense of purpose. Lastly, the order and structure of the narrative arc can allow authors to transform their experiences, though transfigured, into a coherent story. At times they also gain a sense that these experiences are not theirs alone, but part of a larger human drama.

These complex processes rarely lead to some full resolution of core conflicts, relationships, and experiences. However, the authors spoke about how writing does, at times, alter their relationship to this material. It has the potential to lead them towards a deeper understanding of events from their own lives, relationships, and the general human experience. They also spoke about gaining acceptance of and decreased sensitivity to challenging memories and emotions. Most of the time, however, authors do not write to consciously gain these benefits.

They write because they are writers, because they love their characters, and because they love story.

## Implications and Further Study

The field of clinical psychology is charged with the task of trying to understand how people develop, heal, and change. However, the focus of therapy research tends to be less frequently on how people do so on their own and more often on how and when these results occur in clinical settings. This study indicates that the solitary creative act can allow one to access and work with core psychological and affective material and that this can have a complex, profound impact on the creator. We still have much to learn about the value of artistic expression, not just for the pleasure and entertainment it provides, but also for its capacity to affect and even transform the artist and consumer alike.

On the other hand, research has not explored how fiction writing could be utilized in clinical settings. Since this study focused on a small sample of authors who spend years living with and working on their novels, one question to pursue would be whether the psychological and emotional effects of writing fiction can be seen in other settings and with non-authors. As discussed, research on writing has tended to focus on autobiographical accounts or journal writing. If these types of studies were replicated with fiction writing assignments, would the participants display similar mental and physical health benefits? How would manipulating factors such as the length of assignments, specific instructions, and setting affect the outcome? The broader goal of such research could be to explore whether fiction writing projects or assignments can be effectively utilized in therapeutic settings.

In addition, specific areas of growth or change described by these authors could be empirically evaluated. For example, one question for further inquiry is whether fiction authors

already possess a marked capacity for empathy, develop it through the process of writing, or both. Another question is whether people indeed display decreased sensitivity to memories or emotions after writing about them in a fictional format. Studies that focus on specific areas such as this could help clarify the effects of writing fiction and examine its value as a tool for growth and change. While studies could be conducted with novice authors or non-authors, the results would not be entirely applicable to more seasoned authors because their processes differ considerably (Zimmer, 2014). Despite this, these avenues of inquiry could explore the value of fiction writing for working with internal experiences and bringing about change.

**Final Thoughts**

Thomas Merton (2005) wrote that "art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time" (p. 35). This, it seems, is the power of fiction writing. Authors can lose themselves in the task of writing and temporarily leave behind everyday concerns as they are transported into their stories. Simultaneously, writing fiction allows the author to access, utilize, and play with psychological and affective material. Thus, it provides an opportunity to find themselves—to navigate their internal landscape in a non-analytic fashion, even if they are not intentionally setting out to do so. While fiction does not directly depict the details of the authors' personal lives, this does not mean that it is a backdoor to their deepest experiences and truths. Margaret Atwood (2004) said, "Fiction is not necessarily about what we know, it is about what we feel." It is not a concrete, intellectual process, but a felt, intuitive one. The creative act allows the artist to access and play with their internal experiences and to thus be changed in the process, even if it is not always easy to describe how and why.

Jonathan Franzen (2012) said, "My conception of a novel is that it ought to be a personal struggle, a direct and total engagement with the author's story of his or her own life" (p. 129).

The novel can act as a condensed depository for the author's memories, emotions, questions, thoughts, wishes, conflicts, and fears. The best characters and landscapes are like vesicles, filled to the brim with meaning. Then the characters fall in love, experience loss, are triumphant or fail miserably. Graham Greene (n.d.) wrote, "With a novel, which takes perhaps years to write, the author is not the same man he was at the end of the book as he was at the beginning. It is not only that his characters have developed—he has developed with them." If authors have put themselves fully into their work, they come out the other side with a sense that they have gone on this ride alongside their characters and they can be changed by it in subtle and profound ways.

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Appendix A

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

Principal Researcher: Emily Fine, Doctoral Candidate
Department of Clinical Psychology
Antioch New England Graduate School
40 Avon Street, Keene, NH 03134

Thank you for participating in this research project. Your signature on this consent form shows that you have been informed about the conditions and safeguards of this project.

1. This project will include a 1-2 hour interview. We will take breaks whenever you need. During the interview, I will ask you questions about the writing process. After all of the interviews have been conducted and the dissertation completed, I will contact you to share the final product.

2. Your participation is voluntary. You can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

3. At the beginning of the interview, you will have the option of choosing to have your identity disguised and kept confidential. If you choose to do so, pseudonyms will be used and any other identifying information will be omitted from the final dissertation and subsequent articles.

The audio-recorded interview will only be listened to by the researcher. You can request a copy of the transcribed interview if you wish. If you agree to participate in this study, sections of the interview will be printed in my doctoral dissertation and potentially subsequent articles. During or following the interview if there is any quote or subject you do not wish to be printed, the researcher will guarantee that these sections will not be included in the dissertation or subsequent articles.

4. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Dr. Kevin P. Lyness, Chair of the Antioch University New England Human Research Committee, (603) 283-2149, or Dr. Stephen Neun, AUNE Vice President for Academic Affairs, (603) 283-2150.

5. There are multiple benefits to participation. The hope is that this will be an interesting conversation for yourself and the researcher. Furthermore, you will contribute to our understanding of the psychological experience of writing and the impact of the creative process on the writer.

Thank you in advance for you time.
Emily Fine
Doctoral Candidate

______________________________________________________________________________

I have read the information provided and agree to participate in an interview
Signature ______________________________ Date: _________________
Please Print Name: ___________________________________

Contact information to set up the interview: Phone:_________and/or Email:______________

Please return this form to above address. Thank you

# Appendix B
## Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Initial, Basic Questions: Why do you write? What got you started writing?

Method for Guiding the Interview: I will be looking for words, phrases, and descriptions in the participants' answers to these initial questions that focus on the impact of writing on themselves and the emotional and/or psychological aspects of the writing process. If these themes do arise, I will guide them to expand on and delve further into the nature of these experiences. I will do so by reflecting back their responses and asking questions. Throughout the interview, I will strive to not impose my own views or beliefs on their answers, but will instead listen closely to what they are saying and help them elaborate on the experiences, feelings, and thoughts that they have already articulated in their answers. If I need further structure or find that the conversation has halted at any time, I will refer to the questions/themes below to guide the conversation.

Beginning:

1. How do you start a story and come up with characters?
2. How do you know when there is a story that you want to write?

Middle:

1. In the process of writing your books/stories, are there ways in which the characters have/had a personal impact on you?
2. Are there times when you feel emotionally effected by the story and the writing process?

Completion:

1. How is it for you when you finish a book/story?
2. When you've completed a book/story, are there ways in which you have felt changed by or influenced by the book/story you've written?

Appendix C
Sample Interview Matrix

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| R | Well I'm 63, but it's funny because I've always written 10 years, a lot of my books are about people 10 years down the road. Straight man I think was a book about a man's relationship to his daughters after his daughters were grown despite the fact that my daughters at the time were just still little girls, but I was wondering "My god what's it going to be like when they're grown? What happens when they're married? What if they marry someone I don't like? Or what if one of my daughters ever married a man who hit her?" So I was ten years in the future writing that story. | Often writes about characters 10 years older<br><br>Exploring the unknown | Exploring future and unknown through writing |
| E | So it's almost like, it's the unknown that you're exploring | | |
| R | Um huh. And sometimes trying to fend off particular events. That Old Cape Magic was written in the knowledge that both of my daughters were going to be married within the next year and ½. So suddenly I was writing about weddings, and having disastrous weddings, in the hope of staving off (laughter) | Fend off future events, potential catastrophes | Fend off particular future events |
| E | Right, even if it doesn't work out well it couldn't be that bad! | | |
| R | If you can make an enormous porch collapse with all the wedding guests, pitching them into a privet hedge, then there's a pretty good chance that the actual weddings will stop well short of that. | Fend off disaster | Fend off particular future events |
| E | Do you find it helps you? The looking into the future… . . . | | |
| R | Um, yeah I think that was certainly true of Straight Man, especially Hank's relationship with his daughter, I think it was a way of me preparing myself to be a different kind of father to a 19 or 20 year old daughter, I think it kind of helped me get there. | Preparing him for different phase of fatherhood | Helps him prepare for future events |
| E | It's practice | | |
| R | Yeah that's right, it's like a starter daughter | | |

Author Bios

**Jonathan Lethem**

Jonathan Lethem has written nine novels, a novella, several short story collections, and various nonfiction essays. His novels are often genre bending, varying from science fiction to detective story to literary novels. His novel *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) won the National Book Critics Circle Award. In addition, he was a recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship and his recent book, *Dissident Gardens* (2013), was a New York Times Best Seller. His writing style is unique and witty. At times it contains an intriguing mix of fantastical, exaggerated elements and poignant realism. He was born in Brooklyn, New York, and currently lives with his wife and two children in Maine and in California, where he teaches at Pomona College.

**Richard Russo**

Richard Russo has written seven novels, several of which take place in small, failing Northeastern towns partially based on his hometown, Gloversville, New York. His 2001 book, *Empire Falls* (2001) won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. In addition, he has published a collection of short stories and several essays. He has co-written a number of screenplays and has recently published a memoir (2012) primarily revolving around his relationship with his stylish, ambitious, but mentally unstable mother. His writing is bitingly humorous and portrays small-town American life. One interview described his writing well: “Russo's vision of America would be bleak, except for the wit and optimism he infuses into his stories. Even when his characters are less than lovable, they are funny, rueful, and unfailingly human” (“That old cape magic review,” n.d.). He has two daughters and currently lives with his wife in Maine and Boston.

**Tova Mirvis**

Tova Mirvis has written three novels: *The Ladies Auxiliary* (1999), *The Outside World* (2004), and *Visible City* (2014). The *Ladies Auxiliary* takes place in a small, insular Jewish Orthodox community in Memphis not dissimilar from the Memphis community where she grew up. Her second novel also concerns the orthodox world, with characters struggling with what to do when family members' beliefs and practices diverge. Her latest novel is described as "an intimate and provocative novel about three couples whose paths intersect in their New York City neighborhood, forcing them all to weigh the comfort of stability against the cost of change" ("Visible City Description," n.d.). Her writing often deals with the themes of the tension between familiarity and change as well as the ways in which we are often outsiders and insiders simultaneously. Her essays have appeared in newspapers and magazines such as *The New York Times* (2014b) and *The Huffington Post* (2014c). Mirvis lives in Newton, Massachusetts, with her three children.

**Mary Doria Russell**

Mary Doria Russell's first book, *The Sparrow* (1996), won several awards including the British Science Fiction Association's Best Novel. In this novel, a Jesuit Society organizes a scientific expedition to a newly discovered planet. A diverse cast of characters find themselves in a situation that leads them to question the meaning of morality, religion, and being human. After writing a sequel to *The Sparrow*, Doria Russell wrote three historical novels. She writes from the perspective of a broad cast of characters in a wide range of settings including the network of Italian citizens who saved the lives of forty-three thousand Jews during World War II (2005) and later Doc Holiday (2011) and the circumstances that led up to the historical O.K. Corral gunfight of 1887. Doria Russell's characters are complex and witty, their questions and actions deeply

human. Doria Russell does extensive research for her books, which comes through in the sense of immersion the reader feels in the settings she recreates. She was born in Chicago and studied cultural and social anthropology and then received a PhD in biological anthropology from University of Michigan. She lives with her husband outside of Cleveland, Ohio.

**Christopher Paolini**

Christopher Paolini began writing his first book when he was just 15 years old. *Eragon* and the three books that followed in his *Inheritance Cycle* take place in a land called Alagaesia. They are the story of a farm boy who discovers a dragon egg in the woods near his home. He is swept into a magical, dangerous journey in which he and his dragon, Saphira, aid in a battle against a malevolent dragon rider who has spread darkness and death over the land of Alagaesia. Paolini and his family self-published and promoted the book, selling over 10,000 copies before a propitious event occurred. While travelling in the area, the author Carl Hiaasen purchased a copy of *Eragon* at a local bookstore for his son. The son became instantly immersed in reading the book for the entire car ride. Carl passed the book on to Random House and *Eragon* quickly became a bestseller. *Eldest*, the second book in the series, won the 2006 Quill Award and the Book Sense Book of the Year award. The *Inheritance Cycle* includes four books, which have sold over 33 million copies worldwide. Paolini is now working on several new book ideas, including a science fiction novel. He lives with his family in Paradise Valley, Montana.