

Untitled Books Blog

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CALLING A TUNE

Elanor looks back on the coincidental encounter that led to her novel, and on her approach to characterisation and storyline.

I'd walked to the Piazza di San Lorenzo and was leaving the Basilica and crossing the square when I noticed a café with tables in front. A couple came out with tea, taking blankets from a pile by the door and wrapping themselves up. There were braziers between the tables, and as this pair of lovers warmed their hands I decided to do as they had and sat shrouded against the cold.

Our tables were close enough for me to discover they were on their honeymoon, and Londoners like me. Having talked about their day, and their plans for the evening to come, they fell silent, taking books from their bags and beginning to read. After a time, the woman threw hers down with a sigh and an affectionate argument ensued about what was or wasn't an acceptable way for a writer to conclude a novel.

There was something about this couple that struck me as remarkable. I can't say what exactly; there was simply an ease in their companionship I found beautiful. Eventually the husband went in to pay. As he emerged again he caught my eye and smiled. The two of them walked off across the square, laughing, and he took his wife's hand in his and brought it to his lips and I wondered what the future held for him, caught as he was in his happiness.

And then I saw it, just for one horrible moment: I had a sudden image of him bereft. I imagined her being taken from him and all of his happiness vanishing. That was when *Every Contact Leaves a Trace* presented itself to me: the story of a perfect love, lost in an instant.

Before I started to write the novel, I wrote my characters' names on a piece of paper. Characterisation is something I think of as indistinguishable from narrative. My characters were unplanned, becoming who they were as I wrote. I suppose I could say they came from different places, and from all the reading I have ever done. It was a few years ago that I made notes in the margin of a John Updike story that began halfway through a conversation; one by James Lasdun that did something amazing with lobsters; another by Anton Chekhov that made me cry; and another by Maile Meloy that made me feel the cold of the snow a character walked in. *Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*, *Middlemarch*, *A Suitable Boy*, *Liars and Saints*, *Vanity Fair*, *Tom Jones*, *Tender is the Night*, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, *Some Hope*, *A Long Long Way*, *Spies*, *The Remains of the Day*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Atonement*, *Bel Canto*, *Carry Me Down*, *Slaughterhouse 5*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Good Soldier*, *Be Near Me*, *Day*, *The Blind Assassin*, *A Fine Balance*, *Moon Tiger*, *Our Man in Havana*, *Père Goriot*, *Gilead*, *Bleak House*, *Howards End*, *Arthur & George*, *August*, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, *The Tempest* and *The English Patient* are some of my books that are marked up too.

As well as writing out my characters' names before I began, I copied out my epigraphs and drew up some rules. Having identified in myself a tendency towards planning rather than doing, I imposed a ban on plans and notes and charts and timelines, resolving to write only the novel. As it progressed, I

summarised retrospectively, in the style of the notes heading up the chapters in *The Pickwick Papers*, so that I could look back over a bullet point version of the plot that was emerging. Partway through the novel, I wrote the words “SCENES TO COME” on a piece of A4, with a list below: “A Bird in the Snow”, “An Engagement Dinner”, “The Kiss in the Secret Garden”, etc.

The friends who read my first draft of part one asked for some changes and suggested I talk to the police. I prepared a short-form chronology table of the days surrounding the murder for the policeman-turned-barrister who kindly helped me. I produced another draft incorporating his input and asked my friends to read it again and made more changes. When Beth Coates, my editor at Jonathan Cape, suggested further improvements, I lifted my embargo on notes and charts and timelines. I mapped the whole novel out again, scene by scene, following methods described to me by a playwright and some filmmakers, so that I could see spaces into which I could insert the new material Beth requested, and so that the knock-on effects of our moving things around, or removing things altogether, would be apparent.

I will describe the approach I took to my storyline by reference to jazz. A jazz musician who knows her standards can turn up in a jazz club anywhere and call a tune, crossing barriers of language and culture as the opening notes sound and a group of complete strangers perform with an ease suggesting they’ve played together for years. Jazz is a language without words, and can be spoken without the potential for misunderstanding present in verbal conversation.

‘Knowing a standard’ means, at its simplest, memorising the tune, or the ‘head’, and the underlying chord sequence, or ‘the changes’, and being able to play it in any key. There are variant changes, of course, and a player can signal by the use of a particular chord or alteration that she will be referencing one of those variants. A rhythm section that’s good enough will hear the sign and, if they want to, follow it.

When it comes to each of the players taking solos, the changes are repeated as many times as necessary, and a rhythm section that’s listening will respond to a solo leaning towards a particular sound or style, creating something cohesive. Fours might also be played, whereby each player will solo for four bars and hand over to the drummer for the next four before another player picks up the solo.

When jazz musicians are trading fours in this way, they’re not just having a conversation with one another, they’re also having a conversation with their musical ancestors, both from inside and outside jazz. A lot of the early jazz masters were heavily influenced by opera, with players like Louis Armstrong learning all the big arias. Phrases will sometimes be dropped into a solo from the heads of other standards altogether (sometimes referred to as ‘comedy quotes’), or from other players’ solos on the standard that’s being played. Other phrases might be drawn from a universal arsenal of licks or riffs, the provenance of which is not so readily identifiable.

A truly improvised solo is, by definition, unplanned. A musician who stands up with years of study and listening behind her, and tries to do something new, will aim to play a ‘line’ over the changes; to pick out an innovative and melodic route between the chords. An example of this is Lee Konitz playing over “You’d Be So Nice to Come Home To” on his album *Motion*. The head itself is reserved to the very end of the track, Konitz having spent most of the previous 10 minutes and 15 seconds tracing his way there.

In Maile Meloy's *The Apothecary*, 14-year-old Janie Scott jumps off a roof before the elixir she's drunk has finished transforming her into a bird. Reminding herself in the split-second before she jumps to "Allow for the possibilities", she finds, after almost making fatal contact with the earth, that she can fly.

Playing with a four-year-old child last week, I told him that his toy crocodile had eaten a small plastic robot, Sparks. He believed me, and tried for some time to make the crocodile eat his other robots, before forlornly resuming his search for Sparks. He was allowing for the possibilities.

This 'allowing' is crucial to the study and playing of jazz, and is what I was doing when I heard the theme tune to *Postman Pat* in Charles Mingus's "Boogie Stop Shuffle"; when I realised that the head for "Honeysuckle Rose" or "Moon River" could be played over the changes for "Alice in Wonderland"; and when I found out that John Coltrane, Coleman Hawkins, Gigi Gryce and Ray Copeland's 1959 recording of "Abide With Me" (on *Monk's Music*) fits over Chet Baker's recording of "Minor Yours" (on *Just Friends*), if you start the latter at the second A section of its head.

I tried to write *Every Contact Leaves A Trace* as though I was improvising a solo. I used standard changes laid down by a chain of writers over the last 600 years: locked rooms; negligent or nefarious parents; mistreated orphans who might not actually be orphans; unrequited or illicit love and forcibly separated lovers; violent contests; blackmail letters; secret passageways; journeys through a snowy landscape; a scream at midnight.

As I wrote, I found that licks and riffs were thrown up from works by other writers, musicians and filmmakers, in the form of single lines or whole scenes: a car sliding by on grease; a dead animal leaving blood on a man's shoes as he walks alone; each of two widowers almost a century apart telling the story of his wife's death in an unreliable fashion, having announced that the woman in question "had a heart"; a grief-struck relative holding a dead man's shoes; a couple's relationship ending at a railway station; a hot-air balloon breaking free of its moorings; a square peg in a round hole; a fortune teller in disguise; three young students running around the grounds of their school being chased by a caretaker; a man being led through a garden by his mother naming plants for him; an old man, his powers taken from him, left all alone with his books; three caskets being opened, one by one.

By attempting to improvise a novel, and by imposing a plan-ban, I made connections I wouldn't otherwise have done. While this was fun, I did on occasions find myself in considerable difficulty. I had just begun to wonder whether perhaps the whole thing wasn't such a good idea when I was given a copy of *Reality Hunger* by David Shields, which made me carry on, and which, as I read it, presents a manifesto for creativity akin to Ronnie Scott's response when turning down a request on a gig for a standard he didn't feel like playing: "I'll play this instead. It's got all the same notes, just in a different order."